

Life Goes On by Mileventhings

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Summary: Set one month after season 3. The Byers and El are still adjusting to their move to Chicago, and El's becoming even more quiet and isolated than before. Everyone's worried, but unfortunately they've all got bigger things to worry about. Life goes on, but that's not always a good thing. Mileven centric.

1. Chapter 1

A/n I watched all of Stranger Things 3 in one day and I knew I had to write something for my poor Mileven heart. Please review so I know what parts you liked and what parts you didn't! I obviously don't own Stranger Things or any of the characters!

Mike POV

My unconscious ears are suddenly assaulted by my relentless alarm clock. I wake with a start, having been rudely awoken from a deep, dreamless sleep. I guess that means it's 6.30 AM once more.

I fling my alarm clock across my bedroom to relieve some of my pent up frustration. My friends say I have a lot of that these days. I turn on my stomach, bury my head in my pillow and scream into it. I take a second to compose myself, and then I hop out of bed, without a second to waste. And so starts my freshmen year morning routine.

I throw on my clothes, run a brush through my hair and my teeth, grab a waffle and hop on my bike. Without checking my watch, I know it's 6.45. Way too early for anybody to be awake. As I cycle away from my house, I'm jealous of my sisters and parents who still have an hour of precious sleep time before they have to wake up and start the day.

And so starts my pilgrimage to Cerebro, on the highest (and farthest) part of town. On a good day it takes 45 minutes to get there from my house on a bike. Of course, then I have to ditch my bike and hike up the big hill on foot. I've never been the most athletically talented person but the only good thing about making these pilgrimages to Dustin's super radio tower three times a day everyday for a month is that I'm more fit than I've ever been. When El and I finally see each other again, she won't know what's hit her.

Of course, that's the other good thing about my morning hikes, and by good thing, I mean amazing thing. Because it is my chance to talk to my amazing, wonderful girlfriend El.

When I finally reach Cerebro, I take a second to compose myself after

my long journey. Not that she'll care if I sound out of breath, but it's still best not to take chances with these things. I don't want to sound like an out of shape wastoid.

"Mage, do you copy? It's me, the Paladin." I say into the microphone. We decided long ago that we wouldn't use our names over the radios, specifically El's name, just in case anybody was listening in. We don't want to push our luck. After waiting a second for an answer, I repeat myself four times before I finally hear my favourite sound in the world, the staticky noise that means El is on the line.

"Paladin? Hi!"

"Yeah it's me! Hey!"

After a half hour of talking to El and a quick hello to Will, its time for all of us to go to school. We say our goodbyes and once I begin my descent down the huge hill, the point in Hawkins.

Before the Byers moved to Chicago, El was really coming out of her shell. Despite the stepbacks that came hand in hand with Hopper's death, El was talking more to everyone and was finally figuring out what it meant to be El. She's really funny, she has a weird deadpan sense of humour that always makes me laugh. And she's crazy smart. We all thought she'd have a really tough time trying to catch up and be ready for school this September, and while words are always going to be tricky for her, it turns out she's a ridiculous math whiz. Like she can work out any equation in her head. She says it's because math just makes sense but I'm convinced it's one of her powers. She's also the most genuinely kind and caring person I've ever met. Not to mention selfless. It crushed my heart in pieces for El when Hopper died and she had to move in with the Byers and then had to move away. I may not have been Hopper's biggest fan, and he certainly wasn't mine, but he and El were a real family. And El deserves a real family. The Byers are great and all, and I know El appreciates everything they've done for her, but it just really sucks that she was finally happy and safe, but everything was ripped away from her.

Everything but me, that is. No matter how exhausting this trek to Cerebro is, I love making it, because it means I'm going to talk to El. Her voice is my favourite sound in the world. That is chronically

cheesy, and I'd never say it to her or anyone, but it's true. I'm completely in love with her and if that's not evident from the fact that I wake up at 6.30 AM every morning just to talk to her, I don't know what else I can do. And she loves me. When she told me that just before the Byers left for Chicago, I could feel each individual brain cell shutting down. I was totally in shock, I forgot how to even breathe. She kissed me straight after, but I couldn't even reciprocate it because the only thing I could think of was, why the heck would she love me? She's literally the coolest person on the planet and she heard me tell basically the whole world that I'm in love with her, so she has definitive proof that I'm a dweeb, but apparently she loves me anyway? How does that work?

And it's terrible and awful, I know, but I haven't actually told her to her face yet that I love her too. But what can I do? She told me how she felt literally just before they got in their U-Haul truck on moving day and I don't want to tell her I love her for the first time over the radio, so I'm in a sticky situation. I've decided I'll definitely do it the next time I see her in person, this thanksgiving at the Byers house in Chicago. I just have to wait one more month.

That month can't come fast enough though. As much as El seemed to be coming out of her shell in Hawkins, her progress seems to kinda have regressed since moving to Chicago. Maybe it's just because we're only talking to each other through radios, but she seems quieter than normal, and less engaged. Maybe it's me. Maybe there's cool new guys in her new school and she's realised her mistake in telling me she loved me. Until I see her face to face, I'm just going to keep conjuring up all the worst case scenarios for El and I.

Anyway, after this morning's conversation lagged even more than usual, I think it's time to consult Will and ask if he thinks El is ok. I know he's had his own problems with her in the past, but after everything that happened this summer I know he wants to help her in any way he can and promised he'd keep a close eye on her. And like I said, El is selfless and caring and I know that she wouldn't want to worry me with anything, so if she was having a problem, I doubt she'd tell me. She's used to taking care of herself. The thing she has yet to realise is that it is literally my job to worry about her. And I will get to the bottom of this.

2. Chapter 2

A/n I didn't mean for this chapter to be so long but once I started thinking about things from El's perspective I wasn't able to stop. Sorry not sorry.

El's POV

After Mike and I turned our radios off and I said goodbye to Joyce, Will and I hopped on our bikes, cycling to school in silence. As our little house grows smaller as we cycle away I think about how many different versions of life and home I've experienced in just the last two years. Though I think the place where I truly belonged was in the little cabin with Hop, I've learned to appreciate life with the Byers. Joyce and I have always had a special connection and she's really the only person who's come close to acting like a mother to me. I love her and I know she loves me, if only because I saved Will all those years ago and I remind her of Hopper, in a good way.

It's been harder to adjust to having two brothers. It's weird having to wait to use the bathroom and having to share the TV, but for the most part I stay out of Jonathan and Will's way. When the boys found out that I'd be moving in with them, they were very kind and understanding but things are still strange between us. As much as Joyce tries to embrace this brave new world with a telekinetic adopted daughter, I still feel like a guest in their house, forever on the outside looking in. Joyce, Jonathan and Will are their own little family and they don't need me. I'm just this annoying loose end that nobody else was able to tie up. I'm never going to be El Byers. That's why Hop and I fit together, both totally alone, family rejects, broken in too many places. But now it's just me. Still broken, but now I'm all by myself.

I'm quiet and I try to keep out of everybody's way. Whenever the others call me into the kitchen for game night or the living room for movie night, I always politely decline. I think they think that I'm still mourning Hopper or I'm moping about being away from Mike, but that's not true. I'm giving them space. They're too nice to say anything, but I'm not apart of their family. Just because it seems to be their job to feed and shelter me, it doesn't mean they should be

forced to spend time with me.

I think Jonathan is afraid of me. He's nice and all, but he's always on his best behaviour around me, afraid to say the wrong thing and afraid to relax. Probably afraid to set me off. I'm not sure it matters to him that my powers are still MIA, he's still wary. He's kind and he genuinely means well, but to him I'll always be the alien lab creature who accidentally got his brother kidnapped by a monster. It doesn't bother me. The less people that get closer to me, the better.

Things with Will are different. They've always been different. When the party learned I was ok after I closed the gate for the first time last year, it took ages for Hopper to allow me to go out and see everyone. He figured it was safer for people to visit me one on one, with big gaps between each visit. Everyone came to visit at least once but Mike and Dustin were my favourite visitors. Mike, for obvious reasons, and Dustin because he always made me laugh. Back then I was still getting the hang of using words so I never really had any idea what Dustin was saying, but it didn't matter. He was always so funny and even though I'm not and was never a sparkling conversationalist, Dustin talked enough for the both of us so things were never awkward. Lucas came a couple of times, but without anyone else prompting our conversations, our talks often lagged, composed of awkward silence after awkward silence. It was entirely my fault and I love Lucas, but we never had that much in common and the one on one visits were a little too intense for my liking. Max came once, because the boys had all told me about her, but again, for reasons entirely my fault, she was never my favourite visitor. I was angry and jealous of her because she was free and had long hair and could just hang out with the boys, no strings attached. It's weird to think that if I just tried talking to her we could have been best friends all this time.

Will, however, was a hard nut to crack. He came to visit a couple of times, but he was always accompanied by Joyce. Joyce would always want to come talk to me and get to know me, which left very little time for me to get to know Will. I wanted to talk to Will about certain things we've both seen and experienced, but it was obvious he didn't really want to talk about that scary stuff. He was always a little standoffish during his visits but Mike told me it was just because he's

quiet and shy and basically only knows about me from the stories.

So anyway, when I was trapped in the cabin, I always wanted Mike to come visit instead of the others, meaning that when I was finally granted more freedom over the summer, I knew Mike much better than any of the others, and because we were so infatuated with each other, I never bothered to really try get to know the others. Which means although Will and I hung out a lot as part of the group, we were basically strangers. Which isn't ideal, seeing as the two of us are the only ones who truly understand everything that's happened over the last few years.

I think Will feels sorry for me and either wants to try get to know me better or else Joyce and Mike have asked him to, because he never lets me get far without asking if I need a glass of water or help with my homework or if I want to borrow his colouring pencils. But it doesn't matter. I'm always nice and civil to him, but I'm staying firmly behind the nice wall I've built around myself. The less people that climb the wall the better, and the less pain there'll be if anything bad happens.

School is weird. And hard. Will's tried to explain the politics of the social hierarchy here but he's still trying to understand it himself. All I know is that I speak when I'm spoken to, for example if my biology partner says hi, or if I'm called on during class, but that's about it. I eat my lunch by myself in the library. Reading has become my escape. Hopper used to read every night to me. I'm sure Joyce would too if I asked her, but I don't want to inconvenience her, and also that old tradition makes my time with Hopper more sacred. Without anyone to read to me, I've had to read to myself. With all this reading I'm doing, I've gone up three reading levels, meaning I'm almost as good as my classmates.

Which is good, because I need all the help I can get. I'm good at math and science, they just come naturally to me. They just make sense. English is impossible though. There's too many words with too many different meanings and too many literature characters with too many feelings. There's not exactly much of a comparison between *The Great Gatsby* and my *Babysitters Club* story books. But I'm keeping my head above the water, just about, and it's looking like I'll pass my classes. I'm putting more work into my schoolwork than I ever

thought possible, but it serves as a nice distraction. If I pour myself into my homework and studies, I don't have any space left to panic about Hopper or Mike or mind flayers. So it's a win win situation.

When I eat lunch in library, I usually see Will there too, staring at me until I look at him, and then quickly averting his eyes as if he was caught doing something wrong. I don't know if Will is following me or if he just likes eating here too, in the quiet, too content with our real friends to make new ones. All I know is that to Will and Jonathan, I'm one long complicated math equation that they can't figure out, and they're too afraid to try.

As Will and I cycle to school in silence, my thoughts drift to the conversation I had this morning with Mike. I've never exactly been a talkative person, but being with Mike was the exception. He never made me feel stupid for not knowing things and he always understood my sense of humour, laughing even when most people didn't realise I was making a joke. He was the first person to make me feel truly safe. When he holds my hand I feel every cell in my body tingling with excitement. He made me feel pretty even when I had no hair. He still makes me feel pretty no matter what wild colour combinations I wear. When he kisses me I feel like the rest of the world melts away into nothing and there's no such thing as the lab or the demogorgan or the Upside Down. There's just us. And I love him. I've basically loved him since I first met him, even though I didn't know what love was. I know what the others think about us, that I have no idea what love actually is because of my, shall we say, sheltered childhood and that I only think I love Mike because he was one of the first people to be nice to me. But that's not actually the case.

Some people think that just because I don't say much and I don't have the most extensive vocabulary or the widest range of experiences that I have the mind of a small child. But let me just say, if there's one thing I understand in the whole world, it's my own feelings. They're all I had when Papa locked me up in tiny dark prison cells. I know what happiness and safety and love are. I know what home feels like. I know anger and pain and confusion and loneliness too. Just because I may not always have the right words to express what I'm feeling, it doesn't mean I don't understand it.

So with this in mind, despite what others may think, I know with absolute certainty that I am in love with Mike. Which is why I'm forcing myself to drift away from him, being even more quiet during our Supercomm conversations, becoming distant and unresponsive. I know that need to breakup. But I know Mike too well that I can't just dump him like this summer if I want the breakup to be permanent. He wouldn't rest until we got back together. And besides, he knows me too well. If I just broke up with him out of the blue he'd know something was wrong. So I've decided to break up with gradually and slowly, making the process as painless as possible for both of us.

Because I also know with absolute certainty that breaking up is the only way to keep him safe.

3. Chapter 3

Will's POV

As usual, Eleven didn't say anything as we rode to school on our bikes. The silence used to bother me more, especially after becoming accustomed to Dustin's inability to shut up. But now I can appreciate the silence that El chooses to surround herself with. After all, I'm usually the quiet one, the thoughtful, introverted, shy one of the group. Suddenly though, between the two of us, I'm the talkative one, the one trying to move the conversation forwards, frustrated by the invisible wall Eleven's built around herself. I don't understand how that role reversal happened, but it's not the first thing around here that I haven't been able to understand.

I'm still adjusting to the new normal, with a sister who used to have superpowers but is now essentially mute. I've never been close with her, and I hate to admit it, but a lot of that is my fault. I've never made an effort to get to know her, even when she first came back. After the Upside Down, Dustin and Lucas told crazy stories about her, like she made Troy, a kid who made our lives miserable, pee himself, she flipped a van once and she killed the demogorgan. But that's all they've ever been to me. Stories. Crazy, far-fetched, bedtime stories. It was different when Mike talked about her though. In Mike's stories, she wasn't some almighty, unattainable comic book character. She was just a girl with cool abilities that came in handy but ultimately meant she had a difficult life. When he talked about El, something changed in his eyes and his voice got all choked up. A deep sadness came over him, he couldn't even mourn or grieve because he was too genuinely hopeful that she'd come back. When she did return, Mike changed instantly. Gone was the moody and emotional preteen cliché, he was now a love struck, 14 year old god with a girlfriend. My caring, introspective best friend got lost somewhere along the way and now all that was left was a boyfriend itching to swap spit with his telekinetic girlfriend. Everything changed so quickly, suddenly Mike and Lucas had girlfriends and Dustin spent all his time with Steve, trying to be a new, cooler version of himself. It's like I blinked and suddenly I didn't recognise the party anymore. I get it now, we're all just growing up and changing and I can't exactly blame

my friends for that. But after everything that's happened in the last couple of years and the emergence of complicated feelings about romance that I don't quite understand, I just wanted things to stay the same forever. But that can't happen, I think I understand that now.

But before I came to this realisation, I had a tendency to blame Mike and Eleven for everything, even if I never said anything to them about it. I hated how Mike acted like Eleven was all that mattered, that his friends who were there all along weren't worth his time anymore. And I blamed Eleven just because it was easy to. I purposefully never got to know her so it would be easy to blame her. It was easy to pretend that she was the cause of all my problems. She opened the gate to the Upside Down, she changed Mike. She's the monster.

But after everything that's happened over the summer, I realise I'm basically a terrible person, and I'm desperately trying to build some kind of bridge between El and I and show her how truly grateful I am for everything she's done for all of us. I didn't realise how physically demanding her powers were, and I felt sick watching her in pain when her leg was injured at Starcourt. She's an actual, real life superhero. All of a sudden, I could understand why my friends became obsessed with her after they met her. Even besides the fact that her powers are actually incredible, she's so brave and determined and heroic that it's captivating to watch. But since then, she's lost everything. Her powers, her father and, even to some extent, Mike, due to the long distance between Hawkins and Chicago. Considering her difficult childhood, or lack thereof, she deserves a happy ending. Not more pain, suffering and loss. Now that we're so far away from everyone else, I'm trying my best to make her feel better about things. Especially seeing as she's basically my sister now.

The problem with Eleven though, is that she is a very difficult person to get to know. I'm quiet, but Eleven is another story completely. She literally never speaks. I always try make conversations with her and though she's never rude or impolite, it's clear she's uninterested in talking to me. But I guess the worrying thing is that, from what I understand, she's not usually this quiet. She used to actually carry conversations. I noticed it myself back in Hawkins. Mike and Max even say she's actually really funny. So maybe it's because we're so

far from Mike and Max, or maybe she really misses Hopper, or maybe she just doesn't like me, but she's definitely quieter then she's ever been.

My mom and Mike are really worried about her, and I can see why. And Mike's basically made it my job to fix her, which is fair, but I don't know what to do. The thing is, she doesn't seem unhappy. She doesn't have the twinkle in her eyes that she has when Mike's around or the easy smile she has with Max, but she seems content all the same. She's seems fine spending all of her time alone in her room and she's fine eating her lunch alone in the library at school. I usually follow her to the library and eat there too, staring at her until she catches me, feeling inexplicably guilty for everything she's been through and wanting to help in any possible way.

The truth is, I'm quickly realising that I need her more than she needs me. She may be fine talking to nobody, content to be left alone with her thoughts, but I'm not. The only good thing about moving away from everything I've ever known was that I'd have a party member with me. Though we were never really friends, I was ok knowing that I wouldn't be alone because I'd always have Eleven. I never factored in the possibility that she wouldn't want anything to do with me.

I'm not the only one who feels shunned by Eleven's self imposed isolation. She probably doesn't even realise, but she's developing quite the reputation here at our new high school in Chicago. Anyone can see that she's really pretty, her clothes are cool and the rare occasions she does speak, she's always really nice to everyone, not a bumbling idiot like me.

To our classmates, Eleven is a beautiful, confident mystery and she's attracting the attention of both popular girls and popular boys. Not that she's noticed. Mike should probably feel threatened if not for the fact that Eleven refuses to talk to anyone.

We arrive at school and lock up our bikes at the gates when El politely waves and says, "Bye Will! See you later." as she begins to walk away.

I literally can't deal with another day all by myself, too shy to talk to any classmates who think I'm some mute, weird new kid. While

Eleven's silence is mysterious and endearing, my innate shyness is considered totally creepy. So I decide to take the plunge and build some semblance of friendship with El, for the seven millionth time.

"Hey Elev- I mean, Jane" I call, remembering just in time that she goes by Jane here at school.

"Yeah?" She stopped walking away and turned to face me.

"I was just wonder if you wanting to eat lunch together or something today? We can, you know, get to know each other better." I try not to sound dorky or nervous, even though I really am.

"That's ok Will, I'm good. Thanks anyway. See you later!" And with that, she walks away from me, leaving me completely alone, once again.

4. Chapter 4

A/n. Thanks so much to everyone for all the reviews and feedback, it's really helpful so keep them coming! For anyone wondering, I know El's language in her POVs is more advanced than the show but that's just how I illustrate her thoughts best. If you look at any interactions she has with characters, her actual speech is a lot more basic and realistic for her character.

El's POV

We dissected a frog today in biology class. My lab partner, Matt, wasn't much help. I ended up doing pretty much everything because he said he didn't want to frog guts on his jeans, but judging by the look of his face, he was disgusted. I didn't mind though. I've seen a much more disgusting creature crawling around inside my own leg, so to be honest, frog insides are pretty tame for me. I could see him watching me closely from the corner of my eye as I worked. He stared at me in a way that I'm not quite used to. Usually when people stare it's because I'm weird and different and they don't understand me. When Matt stares though, I think he means it in a good way. He kept cracking jokes during class, trying to make me laugh. At least I think they were jokes. I didn't really understand what he was talking about but I giggled out of politeness anyway.

Just before class ended, our teacher Mr. Newman told us that we all had to write a paper with our lab partners, analysing the dissection. When the bell rang, I started to pack away all my things and head to my next class when Matt caught my arm.

"Hey Jane!" he called.

"Hi?" I replied, confusion probably evident on my face. Class was over, why did he still want to talk to me?

He leaned on one of the desks in the classroom and ran his hands through his gelled hair, looking like a young Steve Harrington. "I was wondering if you wanted to meet up after school to work on the paper about the toads."

"Frogs." I said, deadpanned.

"I'm sorry, what?" he said with an amused smirk.

"You said toads, but the paper is on frogs."

"Right ok, sure, frogs." He laughed. "So is that a yes?"

I hesitated before answering. I really didn't want to go with him. Not even a little bit. I have no intention of making friends here. But, I need the paper to get a good grade. So I guess I don't have a choice.

"Yeah, sure I guess." I fake a smile.

"Awesome. Ok here's my address." Matt handed me a slip of paper with writing on it. "Come over at around 7."

I take the paper and nod with a smile.

"See you later Jane." And with a wink, he walked out of the classroom.

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As Will and I got off our bikes when we arrived home after school, I remembered Matt's invitation.

"Will?" I called.

He turned quickly to face me. "Yeah?" he replied eagerly. I wasn't sure why he looked so excited. He was probably shocked that I started a conversation with him.

"I have to go to my lab partner's house later to do a paper. Where is this?" I handed him Matt's address.

He inspected it for a second. "It's actually really close to here I think, just a 2 minute bike ride." I took back the address and said thanks, walking ahead of Will to the front door.

"Wait for me, El. Who's your lab partner anyway? Is it someone I might know? It's really cool that you're making friends."

"It's Matt Anderson." I tell him. "And we're *not* friends" I murmured under my breath. I don't think Will should know about my decision to never make another friend as long as I live. He'd just tell Mike or Joyce and they'd just get worried about me. Or should I say, more worried about me than they already are.

"Matt Anderson? The Matt Anderson? As in, quarterback, homecoming king and all round most popular guy in school Matt Anderson? You're kidding right?" Will exclaimed with shock.

Now that I think about it, Matt probably is popular. I never really noticed before because it didn't exactly affect me. He's always surrounded by muscular guys wearing big jackets that Will told me are called Letterman jackets. He's always stared at by groups of girls like Stacey, the girl back in Hawkins who refused to dance with Dustin at last year's Snowball. I also blew up a smoothie in her face at the mall over the summer. But that's another story. They're the kind of girls who have always been pretty and never have to struggle to understand words people use when talking. The kind of girls that I'll never be. In Hawkins that thought might have made me sad, but here in Chicago, I honestly couldn't care less.

I've seen Matt's grades in biology when we get back quizzes and essays and it's clear he's not the most academically talented guy. He's always talking about football. He has huge upper arm muscles and perfectly coiffed hair. He has a face that reminds me of Ralph Macchio or some other movie star. Basically he's the total opposite of Mike, Lucas, Dustin and Will.

So now, come to think of it, from my limited understanding of the high school hierarchy, he actually is pretty popular.

I acknowledge Will's surprise with a shrug. Popular or not, Matt is just somebody who I have to work with to pass this class.

Will just stands with his mouth open in shock. I leave him there and walk inside.

Joyce was preparing dinner for everyone when I walked in. Jonathan was sitting at the kitchen table, helping his mom chop vegetables while studying from an open textbook.

"Hey sweetie! How was school?" she beamed when she saw me.

"Good thanks!" I reply with with a polite smile and without stopping to chat, I make a beeline for my bedroom. As I turn to close my door behind me, I can hear Joyce and Jonathan whispering to each other.

"See! I told you! She's acting, I don't know, cold to us, or something." Joyce whispered furiously.

"Mom, like I said, don't take it too personally, she's like that with everyone. She always has been."

"No she wasn't! She used to be a lot more talkative than this! I'm just worried about her. She's my responsibility after all, and she deserves to feel happy, deserves it more than any of us!"

"Mom! She's probably fine! She talks to Mike like 5 times a day. She's probably just still shy around us, or something." Jonathan reasoned.

"I listened in on her calls with Mike and she barely even talks then either. And you heard Will say that she eats lunch alone at school. It's seriously worrying! I just don't know what we can do! We can't exactly force her to talk to us, but we have to do something about it! She just can be so... different sometimes. I have no idea how to you know, relate to her. What about you? Whenever Will is down, you're able to cheer him up. Have you tried anything like that with El?"

"I don't know Mom, you know it's different with Will. I have no idea how to even talk to El. She's just more, I don't know, difficult."

I close the door quietly, resisting the urge to slam it because it would alert the pair to my eavesdropping. I had heard enough. Just because I know that I'm always going to be an outsider in this family doesn't mean I like hearing it from the Byers themselves.

I open my history textbook and start to prepare for the quiz we have next week, when Mike's voice sounds from my Supercomm. Right on time for his daily 4.45 call.

"Mage, do you copy?"

I try to perk up and fake enthusiasm. "Yeah I'm here." I'm not sure it

works.

"You'll never guess what happened today!" Mike proceeded to launch into a very in-depth description of his day. The best thing about being Mike's girlfriend is that a lot of the time he won't even notice if I don't say much, he talks enough for the both of us. I feign interest in the story and ask the right questions at the right parts. In other words, I play along. I miss Mike so much sometimes I feel like I won't be able to cope with the pain of it. But since I made my decision to distance myself from him, it's easy to ignore the ache I feel when I talk to him. Because despite the pain, I know I'm doing the right thing.

"So how was your day?" He finally finished his story and I know for the rest of the call his attention will rest solely on me.

"Good."

"Good? That's what you said about school yesterday." he joked, but I can tell he's unimpressed by my unwillingness to expand.

"Well it was good again today."

"El, come on..." he sighed. I can feel how worried he is about me. He's afraid I'm not adjusting well or that I'm still wrapped up in my Hopper shaped grief. He has no idea that I'm perfectly fine with my new life. Of course, I'm nowhere near happy here, and my new life will never come close to my life in Hawkins with Hopper, Mike and Max, but that's ok. Happiness is dangerous. Hopper basically said so in the speech he wrote for Mike and I.

But Mike doesn't need to know about my opinions on the futility of life. So I start doing what I do a lot these days, I fake it.

"We dissected a frog in bio today, that was cool."

"Really? That's awesome! I hope we get to do that! What was it like?"

I gave him a summary of the science class, piling on the faux enthusiasm. I honestly can't tell if he bought it or not.

"And I'm going to my lab partner's house later to work on a paper

about it." I concluded.

"Really? It's really cool that you're making friends El!" I could hear the genuine relief in his voice that things seemed to be falling into place, like I was finally happy here. "Just don't forget about your old party back in Hawkins!" he joked, but there was an edge to his voice. I know he wants Will and I to make new friends and be happy here, but not so happy that we decide to ditch our old friends in Hawkins.

For the first time today, I feel an actual, genuine smile form on my face. "That could never happen, Mike. Ever." And I mean it.

5. Chapter 5

A/n Thanks so much for all the reviews, keep them coming!

Joyce's POV

I put all the food on the kitchen table and stopped to admire my handiwork. My culinary techniques have immensely improved over the last few years and my potatoes are runny no more. I felt Jonathan walk up from behind me and kiss my cheek as he sat down at the big kitchen table.

"This looks great Mom." he smiled.

"Well it should, you did most of the work!" I joked. Except I wasn't exactly joking. Jonathan is always so dependable and reliable that I've basically treated him as an adult and a co-parent to Will his whole life. I've relied on him far too much, especially during these past few years. He's missed every opportunity to be a normal teenager because of me. He looks down on the immaturity of his peers, forcing himself into an isolation of his own creation. But I often think about how maybe the others aren't immature, maybe Jonathan is too mature. I'll never forget how happy I was when he told me that Nancy was his girlfriend. They were so sweet and happy together. My troubled, grown up son with a chip on his shoulder became a carefree kid in love.

I wouldn't have moved everyone to Chicago if Jonathan didn't want to. If he had said to me, point blank, that he wasn't going to leave Hawkins, I would have understood. He was going into his senior year with his friends and his great girlfriend. After everything thing I've taken away from him, his childhood, his optimism and his general belief that things will work out in the end, I wasn't going to take his new, happy life from him too. But he sees right through me. Both my sons do. I explained him that I was thinking about moving and he immediately told me that it was a good idea.

"Mom, after everything that's happened here in this town, even in this house, maybe it's better for you to get some space." he argued. I tried objecting, explaining that he deserved a great senior year, but he

wasn't having any of it.

"Mom, you're always protecting all of us. It's our turn to protect you."

He and Nancy were very understanding and helpful during the whole moving process. Maybe it's because for them the distance is temporary, only lasting a year. And they have phones and drivers licenses. They're strong as a couple and as individuals, and they'll be fine, I know it. It was touching to watch them care so much about me to derail their own plans.

Surprisingly enough, Will also took the news well. I know he'd been having a hard time with his friends lately, they all have girlfriends and he's still in that stage where boys think girls are gross. At least I think it's a stage, but then again, Lonnie always did say that Will could be... but it doesn't matter. All I know is that if he is... *you know*, then he is and it won't change anything. He's my son and it doesn't matter if tomorrow he decides he wants a girlfriend, or a boyfriend, or if he decides he never wants either, he'll still be my boy.

But with a group of friends so focused on girls, I think Will was feeling a little left behind. He misses his friends terribly but I think the space is good for him. It gives him room to grow up and figure out what kind of person he is, free from the pressures of his friends to be a certain way. And besides, nothing can change the friendship between the boys, not after everything they've seen and been through, so a little distance is nothing.

El was a little in shock when I told her the moving plans. However, after absorbing the news she seemed ok. She and Mike started immediately making plans for future visits and I think that was the last time I saw the real El, not the shell of herself that she's become. In retrospect, it's been most difficult for her. She lost almost everything she held dear in the space of a week and I was taking away the one constant she had left, her friends. At the time, I was sure that moving would be great for El, it would give her freedom to move on without being constantly reminded of Hopper, just like me. But as each day passes here in Chicago, El becomes more and more withdrawn. She's always been quiet, for obvious reasons, but this is different. She's irrepressibly kind and cheerful and way too polite, as if she's a guest in this house, not actually living here. I'm not sure if

she realises that this new arrangement, this odd little family, is permanent. But then again, she thought living with Hopper was permanent too. And she also probably thought that the lab was permanent. One of these days that girl is going to break my heart.

But dwelling on everything right now won't help anyone and the dinner will just get cold.

"Will! El! Dinner's ready!" I called.

Both of the kids emerged from their rooms and sat down at the table.

"Thanks mom, it all looks great!" Will smiled.

"Thanks Joyce." El chimed in.

"Thanks, but I'm clearly still getting the hang of the oven in this house so the chicken may be a little chewy." Jonathan and Will laughed and El just smiled. "But enough about me, how was all of your days?" I continued.

Jonathan launches into a story about his frustrating photography teacher who wants him to dig deeper and make a personal and honest statement with his pictures. Jonathan's taking the constructive criticism rough and I tried to reassure him, but honestly I know nothing about any form of art. I have no idea where either of my sons get their flair from.

Will gave a short description of his day at school justified by the fact that "Nothing special really happened today either. Relax, it's just school Mom!" He chose instead to tell us about Dustin's funny personality clashes with the high school science teacher in Hawkins, as he was talking to his friends last night on their walkie talkies. I know Will hasn't settled down here in Chicago or made friends yet, but he's still keeping in close contact with his friends in Hawkins. He's not alone. And he's trying, so I know everything will work out for him.

El, however, I'm not so sure about. She didn't have anything to add when the boys recounted their days and didn't offer any description of her own day, choosing instead to remain silent.

"El, how about you? Anything crazy happen today?" I joked, hoping I masked my genuine concern.

"No, everything was fine, thanks." She smiled.

Hopper used to always talk about how funny she was and how great she was to talk to. I know the last months have been hard, but she can't just stop living her life. I decide once and for all that tonight is the the night that I get to the bottom of this problem.

So I took a deep breath and attempted to broach the interrogation carefully. "El, sweetheart," I gave her a sympathetic smile. "What really happened today?"

El looked a little confused. The last few months I've been too easy on her, if she didn't want to talk I never pushed her. But today it's time to start pushing.

"No" she replied confused, as if she couldn't fully understand what was happening. "I don't think so?"

I sighed and decided to change my approach. "Ok, well it's movie night tonight, El. You can pick the movie if you want?"

"Yeah El, I can drive you to Blockbusters." Jonathan added. That boy is always trying to save me.

"That's ok, I'm good thanks." El replied.

I couldn't take it anymore.

"El, sweetie, I understand that it's been a really rough few months for you, for all of us, but especially you. And I know you're dealing with this in your own way, but this can't go on any longer! You can't shut us out like this, or stop talking to Mike or refuse to make new friends here! I know the whole situation is shitty, but we have to make the best of it. I'm so sorry Hopper isn't here for you but you can't stop living! You have to start trying, El, you have to start making an effort!"

After I finished ranting, the kitchen fell silent. I looked over to El and saw her eyes watering. It's the first real emotion I've seen on her face

since she read Hopper's letter. Everything I yelled had to be said, but maybe not exactly in the way I said it.

El swallowed and looked down at her empty plate. "The reason I can't watch a movie tonight is because I have to go to my lab partner's house and work on a paper."

With that, she loaded her plates into the dishwasher, walked to her room and slammed the door. Loudly.

The kitchen was still silent.

"That was a little harsh, Mom." Will said, in low voice so he wouldn't be overheard.

"But it needed to be said, Will. It's been months now and she still acts like this isn't happening, like this isn't her home and like she doesn't have to make new friends. And besides, even if she didn't have to meet her lab partner, she still would have said no to movie night like she always does." Jonathan looked down at his plate and played with the leftovers with his fork as he spoke. "Maybe it was harsh, but everything Mom said was true."

Here is Jonathan, once again trying to save me.

I felt terrible. I didn't mean to upset El, I just wanted her to see things from my perspective. I've never been in this kind of situation before. The only person who would know what to do is dead, thanks to me. Where is Hopper when you need him?

I walked up to El's door and gave it a light knock. When I got no answer, I opened it slowly and walked in, closing the door gently behind me.

My heart stopped when I saw El. She was lying on the bed, face down, sobbing into her pillow. Sobbing loudly into her pillow.

"El, I'm so sorry, I shouldn't have-"

"-Can you get out please?" She looked up at me when I started talking, wiped her eyes and tried to sound like she wasn't just crying.

"Ok, El, I'll give you space if you want but I just need you to know that-

"-Can you just please get out!"

"El, please talk to me. I understand-

El shot up out of her bed. Hopper had told me about her massive tantrums in the past but I've never seen her this angry before. I silently thanked God, Hopper, Bob and whoever else is up there, that she didn't have her powers anymore. I'm not sure I could handle another trashed house.

"What is it that you understand?" El yelled ferociously but with tears still in her swollen, red eyes. "You don't understand anything! You have no idea what I'm going through! You didn't even know Hopper, not like I did! You feel so sorry for yourself because you've lost people you love but whatever pain you're feeling, I promise you I've felt more. I've felt more since I was seven and being used as a human experiment! And you took me away from the one thing I had left, my friends, just because you were sad in Hawkins. You are selfish and stupid and you don't understand anything so can you please just get out!"

El and I both stood totally frozen in shock. Her eyes widened as she realised what she'd just done. I couldn't understand what had just happened. I had never heard El say so much at once before and I had never heard her talk about her feelings and what she had been going through. She's right though, I didn't understand anything.

I turned to walk out the door when I heard a quiet noise.

"Wait!" El squeaked. I looked back at her. "I'm sorry." She added. I waited to see if she had anything more to say, but she just got back onto her bed and turned around so she was facing the wall, with her back to me.

I just nodded and walked out of the room.

I thought I needed Hopper to help deal with El. I forgot how much El needed Hopper to deal with everything else.

6. Chapter 6

Will's POV

Jonathan and I stayed at the kitchen table while we listened to the shouting coming from behind Eleven's closed door after my mom went in to talk to her. The house suddenly went quiet and Mom stepped out, closing the door gently behind her. She stood still, back to the door, head in her hands for a second, composing herself.

Jonathan took a breath. "Mom, I don't think-

"- Just give me a minute." She sighed, walking into her bedroom and shutting the door behind her, leaving the house once more in total silence.

Jonathan and I looked at each other. Our family is in pieces.

"Hey Will, didn't you say you wanted ideas for a short story for English? Do you want to get started?" Jonathan asked, trying to distract both of us from the drama.

I nodded and we started working on our homework together. Acting as if our already fragile family unit didn't just implode. Eleven never stops surprising me. I thought she was just sad about Hopper and moving away from Mike. I had no idea she was this *angry*.

I was snapped out of my thoughts when Eleven emerged from her room. Her hair was brushed and her face was washed and if I hadn't heard her sobbing and yelling earlier, I would have thought she had just spent her day as emotionlessly as ever.

"Hey El-" Jonathan started.

"I'm going to Matt's to work on our Bio paper." El murmured under her breath as she walked past Jonathan and I at the kitchen table.

"Do you know where you're going?" Jonathan started to raise his voice as El walked away from us to the front door.

"Yes." And with that, El slammed the front door and the gravel

outside crackled as she cycled away.

"You probably know her best out of the three of us, do you think she'll be okay?" Jonathan asked me.

I told him exactly what I thought. That I have absolutely no idea. But I do know that if she is going to be okay, we are going to need to help of a certain Mike Wheeler.

It's time to tell him how bad things have really gotten.

...

"Mike? Hey Mike, do you copy? It's me, Will. Come on, Mike do you copy?" I had been trying to reach Mike on my Supercomm for the last twenty minutes. I knew he probably wouldn't be at Dustin's Cerebro until later when he always calls El before bed, but I had to try.

After a while, Mike finally answered. "Mage, is that you? Why are you using my real name?"

"No, it's me, Will."

"Oh hey Will! The rest of the party are gonna come up to Cerebro to catch up with you guys tomorrow. But what's up?"

I took a deep breath. Mike was not going to be happy with the news. "You know how you asked me to help Eleven settle in and stuff and tell you if I thought she was acting weird?"

"Yes?" I could already hear the concern in his voice.

"Well..." I had no idea how to even find the words for what I wanted to say.

"Well what? Come on, Will, spit it out!"

"She's definitely acting weird. Like, definitely."

"Weird in what way?"

"It's just that she doesn't really talk. Ever. And she spends all her time

in her bedroom, we basically only see her for meals. She doesn't really talk to anyone at school, not even me, and she always eats lunch by herself in the library. By choice. And I mean, I don't know her that well, but she wasn't like this in Hawkins, I definitely know that much. I don't know, Mike, something's definitely wrong."

"How long has this been going on?"

I gulped, preparing for Mike's wrath. "Since we moved to Chicago."

"SINCE YOU MOVED?! Will, THAT WAS OVER A MONTH AGO!"

"I know, I know, I should have told you and I'm sorry-"

"HOW COULD NOT TELL ME IF SOMETHING WAS WRONG ALL THIS TIME?"

"Because I knew you'd react like this, Mike. And I wasn't sure if it was a problem or not, I thought she was just shy and mourning and stuff."

I could hear Mike taking a breath, trying to calm down and compose himself. "Well the first thing we need to do is- ... Wait a minute, you told me she wasn't making friends or anything."

"Yeah?" I didn't understand the point he was making.

"But she just told me she was going to her lab partner's house today to work on a project about frogs? So maybe it's not as bad as it seems, maybe she is settling in?" I could hear the hope in Mike's voice.

"Yeah... I don't exactly think Eleven and Matt Anderson are friends." I said, more to myself than Mike.

"WAIT WHAT? HER LAB PARTNER IS A GUY? AND SHE'S AT HIS HOUSE RIGHT NOW?"

That one was completely my fault. My tongue slipped and now I had to face the wrath of Mike The Boyfriend. "Yeah, actually... I had been meaning to tell you..."

"TELL ME WHAT?"

"Honestly not that it matters, because I may not know her well but I do know that she would never cheat or anything-"

"CHEAT?" If I thought Mike had been shouting before, it was nothing compared to this. "WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT? WHY ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT CHEATING?"

"Ok, I'm going to tell you everything but I need you to listen first and yell later. I also need you to calm down before I start."

"Ok." I could hear Mike take deep breaths and slowly calm down.

"Good. Ok look," I struggled to find the right words to explain the situation to Mike in a way that wouldn't make him burst a blood vessel. "My social status here at my new school is basically the same as it was in Hawkins. The new, shy, nerdy, weird kid. The lowest in the totem pole. But it's different for Eleven. She may be new, but she's obviously really pretty, she's always nice and smiley to everyone, she's smart but she's not smart enough to be a nerd and she's really quiet, like in a mysterious way. Everywhere I go in school I hear people talking about Eleven. All the popular girls want to be her friend and, well..."

"Well what?"

"All the popular guys want to date her."

"What?" I could hear the heartbreak in Mike's voice. After a lifetime of bullying, Mike isn't exactly overflowing with self confidence. I definitely feel the same way. I know that he's thinking about how he can never compete with the Steve Harringtons of the world.

"And you know, other things." I gulped. He would not take this part well.

"What do you mean other things?"

I really didn't want to get into this part, but if I'm telling him everything, I can't exactly leave it out. "When I'm in the locker room getting ready for P.E. I hear the guys say some... I don't know... not so nice things about what they want to do to Eleven. You know," my voice had faded to a whisper at this point, "bedroom stuff."

It took Mike ages to answer. I could feel his anger coursing through the radio line.

"Ok, and is her lab partner one of those guys?" he said through his teeth.

"Maybe. Probably. I don't know. I mean, I've never heard him specifically say anything about Eleven but... he is like, king of the school. He's a junior, he's the quarterback and the homecoming king and stuff, and he's got a reputation with like... girls and stuff. So, probably." I hate telling Mike all this, but honestly I don't know what else to do. Eleven's already acting unhinged, and I don't even know how much she knows about that kind of grownup bedroom stuff. And I'm not exactly going to ask Mike about it. All of a sudden I've become really protective of her and I don't know if anyone other than Mike could help.

"So let me get this straight." Mike took a breath. "Douchebags are talking about El behind her back," Another breath. "and she has no idea," Another breath. "and she is currently alone in the house of the king douchebag," A final breath. "and she's been acting really weird and quiet and basically just vulnerable for the last few months."

"Yeah," My turn to take a breath. "I guess that's pretty much what's happening."

"WILL!"

I grimaced, "Yeah?"

"WHAT THE HELL MAN? IT'S SUPPOSED TO BE YOUR JOB TO LOOK OUT FOR HER! YOU'VE KNOWN ALL THIS THE WHOKE TIME BUT YOU'RE ONLY JUST TELLING ME NOW?"

"I... I... I don't know what to say!"

"Look Will, I know you've never liked El and that's fine, I mean, it sucks, but it's fine. But you promised me you'd look out for her over there. I can't believe you wouldn't... I don't know, it's just that, whether you like it or not, El is in the party now, and has been for months. And she's saved our asses more times than we can count.

Specifically your ass. And party members are there for each other *no matter what*. I just can't believe that you didn't help her earlier, like, before it got to this point."

"I'm so sorry-"

"Yeah, whatever. Look I'll call back later when El is back and talk to her then. In the mean time I'll tell the rest of the party what's been happening and see what they have to say. I'll talk to you later."

"Mike wait-"

I heard Mike turn off Cerebro as the line went dead. I felt like I had just been sucker punched. It's probably how Eleven felt when Mom ambushed her at dinner. The thing is though, Mike's right. I've known something had been wrong with Eleven this whole time but I never said anything to Mom or Mike because I don't know, I didn't think it was my place to say anything. I know I promised Mike I'd look after her but I thought maybe she had everything under control, in her own way. I was too busy obsessing over why she didn't want to be friends with me to really care about why she didn't want to be friends with anyone. And I just let all those guys talk about Eleven behind her back because it was easier to ignore it than stand up to guys that are 6ft tall with huge muscles. And I didn't tell Eleven or Mike what they were saying about her because I thought the conversation would be too awkward.

It suddenly hit me why I've been feeling more protective of Eleven. It's because I'm her brother now. But just now, looking back over the last few months, at everything I've done and all the red flags I ignored, I just have to ask myself, what kind of brother am I?

7. Chapter 7

Mike's POV

Shit, shit, shit, shit, shit! How could this happen? How could I let this happen? How did I-

My thoughts were going round in circles. I had to calm down. I had been pacing on top on Hawkins' highest hill next to Cerebro for the last 15 minutes trying to formulate some kind of plan of action. But the terrible truth is that I'm completely helpless.

In relation to my most pressing concern, El's well-being in the bedroom of some older, better looking, cooler jock, there was absolutely nothing that I could do about it. It was totally out of my control, my only hope is that Will finally steps up and finds some way to save El.

For now though, I have to focus on the problem that I may actually be able to solve. Even before they moved to Chicago, I could feel El start to fade away, slip through my fingers. It was even more noticeable after the move. Hell, I even called her out on it when I radioed her after school today. Maybe when I yelled at Will for neglecting El's issues I was a little harsh, because wasn't I doing the exact same thing? Sure, I didn't know how serious it had gotten, but I knew there was a problem, and I just tried to ignore it until it either went away or got worse. The truth is, I'm her boyfriend. I should be able to fix this. I should be able to fix her. But I am totally, absolutely, completely out of ideas.

I knew for certain that there was no point staying here next to Cerebro, waiting for El to pick up when our scheduled call isn't for another 3 hours. And El is an extremely punctual person. So I decided to look for help in the next logical place, the party.

Cycling like the wind, I started radioing the others as soon as I was close enough to town for the others to get signal.

"Lucas, Dustin, Max... do you copy? It's me,... Mike. This is an emergency... code red!...Do you guys... copy?" I huffed, totally out of

breath.

After a few minutes somebody finally picked up. "Mike? What are you doing? You sound like you're dying!" Max's voice taunted.

"I'm... cycling... back from... Cerebro... Can you... get the others... Meet me... in my basement... in 10... minutes."

I had still yet to fully warm up to Max as a member of the party, but whether I liked it or not, and I usually don't like it, Max and El are best friends. Max may be the key to saving El.

"Ok but seriously man, you are sooo unfit." She laughed.

I hate that Max may be the key to saving El.

...

Ten minutes later I found myself pacing once more. But this time I was in my basement, facing Lucas, Dustin and Max sitting on the couch, explaining what Will had told me.

"Dude, that sounds really bad." Worry was etched into Dustin's face as he clasped his hands together on top of his head.

"Yeah," Max chewed her thumb, deep in thought.

"What can we do? How can we help?" Lucas chimed in.

I pulled up a chair and sat down, opposite the others on the couch, running my hands through my hair in defeat. "I don't know. I just... I don't know... wait, Max! What about you? What do you think?"

Max turned slightly pink as all eyes turned to her. "I don't know, we haven't really talked much, you know, lately."

"What? I thought you called her every few days?" Dustin asked.

"Well, I mean, I used to, but you guys know El, she's quiet anyway. When she was here in Hawkins we could talk and joke around and stuff but when we called each other after the move she was even more quiet than usual and it just got hard to talk about stuff. And

then she kinda stopped calling me altogether but I figured it was because we were both busy with school and stuff. And besides, we still talked to each other whenever we had big group calls with everyone. I thought it was just the distance making things awkward between us and once we met in person we'd be fine. I thought it was just with me she was being weird, I didn't realise it was anything to worry about."

I felt my body deflate in defeat. I didn't realise I much I had been hoping that Max would have some magic cure to all El's problems. I may have blew up at Will, and maybe he deserved it, but the truth is, we all knew something was going on with El but we ignored it, hoping it would go away. But it hasn't. And I don't think it's going to.

Wait a minute.

"That's it!" I yelled, jumping out of my seat in celebration.

"What?"

"The hell are you talking about?"

"What is it?" shouted Max, Lucas and Dustin respectively.

I could feel a plan formulating in my head. I could tell it was a pretty shoddy plan at best, a half-baked first step to helping El. It was obvious, and a little too optimistic, but it was something.

"Max, you just said that you thought things between you and El would be fine in person, right?" I asked.

"Yeah, I mean, I'm assuming but-"

"-So I keep thinking, how can we help El all the way in Hawkins? But that's it, we can't!"

"Mike, have you lost it?" Lucas looked confused.

"You want us to go to Chicago, don't you? You think we can fix everything if we see her in person." It dawned on Dustin where I was going with my little speech.

I clicked my fingers into a finger gun in response. "Don't you see? There's no way we can help El from over here! And remember what we've always said? When a party member requires assistance, it is our *duty* to provide them with that assistance."

"That's a nice thought and all Mike, but how would we get to Chicago? And are we just going to magically show up at the Byers, snap our fingers, fix El, and then be back in Hawkins in time for bed tonight?"

"Well, I was thinking-"

"Mike, we know what you were thinking, but the reality is, Chicago is a three hour drive away. And none of us have licenses. And something is seriously wrong with El and there is no quick fix. We'd have to stay in Chicago a while to properly help her. So what, we just show up at Mrs. Byers' house and expect her to let the four of us stay at her house for the foreseeable future? Mike, we have a trig quiz on Monday! We all want to help El, but we can't just run off to Chicago. It won't help anyone, and it'll just get us all in trouble."

It's infuriating how practical Lucas is sometimes.

"Don't you guys see? We can actually do this! It's Friday! We have two whole days before we have to be back for school on Monday and come on, Mrs. Byers won't mind us staying there for a couple nights, especially if we're helping El!" I had some kind of semblance of a plan that might actually work, why couldn't the others see that I was onto something?!

"Mike, this still goes back to the issue of actually helping El. How do we even go about doing that? Where would we even start? And besides, like Lucas said, there's no quick fix, if something is seriously wrong we can't just make her better again in two days. I understand what you're trying to do here Mike, I really do, but I just don't see how it would work!" explained Dustin.

"If we're over in Chicago with her for two whole days I'm sure we'll figure something out. And besides, nobody said we have to just show up and immediately fix her. But who are we kidding, how the hell are we supposed to actually help her, all the way over here? We need to

be with her and see her in person. It's obvious she's feeling alone and helpless, especially without her powers. We just need to show her that it doesn't matter where she is, she always has us. When she sees how much we care about her, she might begin to open up and let us in. We don't need some quick fix, we just need El to know that we're all here for her. Come on guys, it's El! She has literally risked her life for us over and over again. Don't you guys remember when she literally disappeared into thin air in the middle school science lab after killing the demogorgan? Or when she closed the gate last year and was so drained she could barely talk for days? And come on, after everything that she went through this summer? The absolute least we could do is show up when she needs us." The party stared up at me, jaws wide open after witnessing my rant. As I stood breathless following the word vomit, I was transported back to my last rant in front of my one where I announced to the world that I love El.

The one that she heard.

That's another reason I need to get to Chicago, but I can't tell the others for fear of being ridiculed til the day I die, like Dustin (since everything that happened at Starcourt, Dustin has yet to live a day without someone singing the Neverending Story song to his face). El told me before she moved that she heard my speech, and that she loved me too. And I just stood there, mouth open in shock, while El kissed me. I was too confused to even breathe. How could she love me? I'm a total dweeb who doesn't know how to shut up and she's... well, she's El. But my biggest regret is that I never said I love you right back to her, not to her face. I know deep down I'm being delusional, but apart of me hopes that if I tell El I love her that she'll realise that she can't push me away, it won't work. Maybe it will be the encouragement she needs to reach out to the party and let us help her.

Like I said, I know I'm being stupid. Telling her that I love her won't really change anything, especially because she's already heard me say it to the others. But it doesn't matter. She needs to hear it from me even if it fixes nothing, at least she'll know for certain.

"Ok, but we still have one more problem." conceded Lucas.

"What?" I huffed, getting frustrated.

"How are we supposed to get to Chicago?"

"I can drive us!" volunteered Max.

"You've got to be kidding." I groaned to myself.

"There's no way that's happening." Dustin laughed.

I could see Max was getting defensive and riled up, and having been on the receiving end of her fury in the past, I was so glad I was not Dustin. "What's that supposed to mean? Do you not remember when I drove everyone through Hawkins almost a year ago?"

"Max, don't get me wrong, that was the most awesome thing I've ever seen, excluding anything El has ever done with her powers, but driving through Hawkins in the middle of the night is totally different to driving all the way to Chicago." Dustin was amused.

"Oh really? And what do you think Lucas?" Max probed, noticing that Lucas was staying uncharacteristically quiet during the discussion of Max's driving abilities.

With Max's dangerous glare letting Lucas know the right answer, he stammered, "Uh, Yeah. I... I uh totally think that uh... that Max could, you know, uh, drive us to Chicago tonight."

"Thank you! See Dustin, Lucas thinks I can drive us to-"

"Yeah, uh, no. Sorry Max, that's not happening, but fear not! I have the perfect chauffeur for us!" Dustin announced.

I groaned to myself, "I swear Dustin, if you say Steve-"

"-Steve! Steve can drive us!" Dustin proclaimed proudly.

"Seriously Dustin? Why would we ask Steve to drive us all the way to Chicago?" Lucas was as unimpressed with Dustin's solution as I was.

"Uh, because he has a license? And I hate to break it to you Max, but you don't."

"But if we stay overnight at the Byers, then Steve will have to stay

too, and won't that just be really awkward?" Lucas argued.

"Yeah, I mean, I guess..." reasoned Dustin, "But still, we could-"

"-Wait, I've got it!" I thought aloud. "It's obvious!"

My pretty uninnovative realisation was met with blank faces.

"Nancy!" I continued, rolling my eyes at their obliviousness.

"Oh yeah..." mused Dustin.

"Actually, that makes more sense..." Lucas chimed in.

"Ok, so wait," Max's forehead was crinkled, like she was working hard to wrap her head around everything. "This is actually happening? Like, Nancy is going to drive us to Chicago, we try our best to help El, or at least try getting her on the path to help, we sleep there tomorrow night, we drive home the next day on Sunday evening, and be back for school on Monday."

"Yeah, uh, basically, I think." Lucas seemed like he was trying to wrap his head around the impromptu road trip too, and possibly poke holes in the practicality of my genius plan.

We had taken so long talking everything through in my basement that now that we had a plan, I was itching to get on the road. I could feel frustration building up inside me at the inability of the others to process everything faster. Every second we waste, El drifts further and further away from us, her family. "Exactly what part of this plan is confusing you guys?"

Max never really likes when I get frustrated. She rolled her eyes in response.

"Wait a minute, I still have one last question." Dustin realised.

We all stared at him expectantly.

"When is this road trip supposed to be taking place?" he continued.

Everyone looked at me, expecting Mike, the fearless leader, to have

all the answers, like always.

"How does right now sound to you guys?"

8. Chapter 8

A/n I just want to say thank you to all those reviewing this story, it means so much to me that you all take a few seconds out of your day to write a review. You guys have no idea how much reviews help me as I want every chapter of this story to feel true to the characters, while also being enjoyable for me to write and more importantly, enjoyable for you guys to read. So keep those reviews coming so I know what you guys like and what you don't like!

I've said this on before a previous chapter but seeing as this chapter is also from El's POV I just want to remind you guys that her vocabulary in her thoughts is much more extensive than is realistic, but I make sure her speech in dialogue with other characters is as simplistic as it is in the show. The more advanced use of the English language is used in her perspective just to allow me to accurately portray her feelings and thoughts.

Finally here is the chapter that shows El's reaction to everything that happens at Matt's house! I know lots of you guys were really looking forward to this one, I really hope you enjoy!

El's POV

Will was right, Matt's house was a short bike ride away from the Byers' house. Checking my watch, I knocked on the door when the hands reached 7 exactly.

I waited almost a full minute at the front door without hearing any noises coming from inside. Frustrated by Matt's lack of punctuality, I raised my fist to knock again. I jumped back, startled, when the front door suddenly swung open, revealing Matt, leaning on the door frame, wearing more hair gel than usual.

"Why hello there Jane." he smirked. His eyes ran across my whole body, from head to toe, pausing once or twice as they reached certain body parts. "Looking good..."

I stared up at him, absolute indifference painted across the canvas of my face.

"Well okay then," he laughed, "come on in, make yourself at home."

As I pushed past him to enter the house perhaps a little more forceful than absolutely necessary, I think he caught sight of the time on his watch.

"Woah Jane, you are like, super on time. I didn't think people ever actually showed up at the like, agreed time. Haven't you ever heard of fashionably late?" I gave him a weak smile because I knew from the tone of his voice that that was his attempt at a joke. But as with all of his jokes, it wasn't very funny.

Usually I'm better at faking amusement for the sake of politeness, but after everything that happened today, I'm not in the mood. As Matt droned on while he led me up to his bedroom, I tuned him out and for the millionth time in the last hour, I thought about everything Joyce had just said to me. I know it all came from a place of love and concern, but it also came from her being at a total loss at how to help me, fix me. What Joyce, Will, Mike, everyone doesn't understand is that I don't need to be fixed. I'm fine with being broken. Being fixed and whole means just basically waiting for everything to blow up in your face. Again. The breaking hurts, but people don't realise how great being broken is. It means being totally numb to all the pain. It means you won't get hurt again. In the letter Hopper left behind, he talked about how great it is to be out of this cave, but I think he's wrong. This cave that I've built myself is my best friend. Feelings are totally overrated.

Joyce was amazing in the months just after Hopper's death. It was so nice having someone right there who just got it. Who knew how much it hurt and knew why. But then those months ended. Before we left Hawkins, I was never left alone. Joyce or Mike or Max or the others were always right there, so I never had time to myself to really process everything. But after the move, I found myself alone. All the time. Which sounds bad, but honestly it was a good thing. I began to think things through properly, and it made me realise a few things.

As much as Joyce and I grieved together, mourned the loss of this person we loved, it occurred to me that Joyce really had no right to pretend that she had the same connection to Hopper that I did. I get it, the two of them had been really close friends for a really long

time, but Joyce didn't know him like I knew him. She couldn't possibly. Did she know how loudly he snored each night and how hard he denied it the next morning? Did she know that he secretly loved all the soap operas I used to watch, even though all he did was complain about them? Did she know he was the ingenious inventor of the Eggo extravaganza? I don't think so.

I know Joyce and Hopper meant a lot to each other, but the more I thought about it, the angrier it made me to listen to her pretend to be going through the same thing as me. Even with Hopper gone, she had her sons. She still had a family. I had nobody. And she will never understand what it was like to lose my powers. No one will. My powers were a part of me, an extra limb. They were something that I could take for granted, content with the knowledge that they were so much of who I am. It didn't matter that they're the reason my life has been so difficult and painful, I needed them like I need to breathe, in a way completely necessary for life that you don't think twice about.

Without powers, I don't know who I am. Mike and the others have reassured me hundreds of times that they don't care that I don't have powers anymore, I'm still me, it doesn't change anything. I don't think they realise yet that it changes everything. Without powers, what do I have to offer? What is my purpose?

Matt suddenly snapped his fingers in my face, bringing me back to reality. "Hello? You still there? Earth to Jane!"

I giggled and tucked my hair behind my ear. "Sorry, I just... got distracted." I hoped I had been convincing.

"Woah," he smiled with a pantomimed shock. "She speaks!"

I just giggled again. I was running out of ways to be friendly.

"Well, I like it." he was basically snarling at this point, like he was trying to show me all of his teeth at once. He cleared textbooks and clothes from his bed, making space for both of us to sit down. "Most girls never shut their trap. You're a nice change."

"Thank you?" I was getting better, but I still had no idea what people were talking about most of the time.

He started talking about girls in general and it all sounded too much like the conversation I saw Mike and Lucas have about the female species for my liking, so I cut him off. I was here for one reason only.

"-Why don't we get started on the project?" I interrupted him.

"Woah, slow down there. What's with the ants in your pants?" I could tell Matt was kidding, but there was an edge to his voice that I didn't like. I guess I'm not as good an actress as I thought, because my discomfort must have been written on my face. "Hey, I'm just kidding! It's actually a great idea. Business first and then later we can have some fun..." he grinned at me with an eyebrow raised too high to mean anything but trouble.

He stared at me with his green eyes. I found myself mesmerised by them, out of a sheer scientific curiosity. Since Will mentioned to me earlier that Matt is popular, I've remembered endless conversations I've overheard since I started school from an endless number of girls. They all talk about Matt and how perfect he is, specifically on an aesthetic level. But looking at him now, up close with no distractions, I can honestly say that I don't see the appeal. His eyes are a piercing green that make me feel uneasy and on edge, especially compared to the calming comfort of Mike's deep brown eyes. Matt is tall, but nowhere near as tall as Mike, who I'm convinced grows a metre taller every other month, and Matt has a fuller, broader and more muscular shape compared to Mike's slim and lanky physique, and yet I feel like hugging and cuddling with Matt would feel like hugging a marble pillar, hard and lifeless. But collapsing into Mike's arms countless times following draining battles with creatures from the Upside Down allows me to definitively say that Mike's arms are the warmest, most loving place in the world. Even Matt's gelled, lifeless blonde hair can't compare to Mike's unruly, thick, dark tresses.

It suddenly occurred to me that I may have stared at Matt too long while performing my purely scientific probing of his form, and maybe all this staring may have given Matt the wrong impression as I felt his hand slide on top of mine, his fingers playing with Hopper's blue elastic band I wear on my wrist. I snatch my hand away as if Matt's hand is on fire.

"Woah there Jane, calm down!" he balked at my reaction.

I didn't like the look that I suddenly saw lurking beyond his eye. It was something dangerous and angry. His charismatic smile couldn't hide anymore. I suddenly realised that Matt is a person who fakes as many smiles as I do. That makes him dangerous.

"I have a boyfriend!" I blurted.

"Really? Who?"

"He's from home." I answered the way I speak best, short and to the point.

"Ooh, of course, sure." The fake smile crept across his face once more. "And where is home, again?"

"Hawkins." After seeing confusion on his face I clarified, "In Indiana."

"Ahh, I see. Indiana, huh? That's so... rural. You're basically all anybody talks about in school these days and everyone guessed you came from somewhere more glamorous, like New York or something." He looked at me, expecting me to give some sort of explanation, but I had no idea what he wanted me to say. So I just shrugged. "So anyway... tell me about this boyfriend of yours." I noticed him move slowly closer to me. "What's he like?"

"Nice."

"Nice, really? That's all you got? Is he on the football team at least?" Matt asked sceptically.

"No."

"So what does he do?"

"A.V."

Matt burst out laughing. "Wait, Wait, wait. You're trying to tell me that someone as hot as you is going out with some A.V. club nerd? You've got to be kidding me!"

I shook my head.

"Well, lucky me I guess. It doesn't sound like I have much competition."

With that, Matt placed his hand on the side of my face and his tongue made a beeline for my lips. I tried desperately to push him off me with my powers, but all I could hear was that faint buzzing that I've heard every time I've tried to use my powers since I lost them. And he was too strong for me to push him off of me without my powers.

So I got free the old fashioned way. I kned him in the groin.

It was a difficult angle because we were both sitting next to each other at the edge of his bed, so my knee didn't quite have the force that I was looking for, but it still had the same desired effect. Matt's hands clutched his crotch as he slid off the bed in pain and crawled into the fetal position on the floor, screaming "YOU BITCH!" But to be honest, I was too busy being in shock to care.

This was the first time since Starcourt that I genuinely needed my powers, and they weren't there. It was terrifying. I felt totally powerless. But more than that, I felt *angry*. After the day I've had, after the months I've had, I felt angry. All this anger felt like a superpower all on its own. It just occurred to me that I could use it.

I snapped out of my epiphany, realising I still had to get out of Matt's house. Like ASAP. I started to run out of his bedroom as he began he get off the floor. Just as I got to the door I felt Matt grab my arm and yank me back. His face got very close to mine and I could see that anger still lurking behind his eyes. But while my anger gave me strength, his anger made him unpredictable, reckless. He basically spat in my face as he said, "I just need one kiss, that's it. You have no idea how much I need this, you have no idea how much this is going to help both of us."

Before I had time to register what was happening, he pinned me against the wall and started kissing my neck. And when I say kissing, I mean carelessly and roughly slobbering on my neck. I started kicking and screaming, but it was no use, he had my arms pinned against the wall so I couldn't fight back.

As I screamed for help, I felt tears stream down my face. But I wasn't

sad or scared. I was ready. I summoned all my strength, willing the large bookcase on the adjacent wall to fall and crush Matt. In the corner of my eye I could see the bookshelf move slightly, it wasn't much, but after months of nothing from my powers, it was something.

As Matt continued to hold me down as his mouth moved farther away from my neck and closer to my mouth, I channeled everything I had into my powers. Everything. All the pain and the sadness and the helplessness. All the love and hope and belonging. I remembered every conversation I've ever had with Mike, started from our first meeting in the woods and ending with when I told him I loved him in the Byers' house in Hawkins. I remembered shopping with Max and playing video games with Dustin. I remembered feeling comforted and known by Joyce after Hopper's death. I remembered Hopper. How he found me, how he made our tiny house a home, how he taught me what love truly is. All the eggo extravaganzas, all the games of scrabble, all the Miami Vices. I remembered when I found out he was gone, collapsing to the ground with the pain of it. How it felt like the world had ended. I remembered all the times I've fought demogorgans, demodogs, the mind flayer. All the times I've seen the emptiness and loneliness of the Upside Down. The time I closed the gate. All the paralysing fear and the equally paralysing need to protect everyone that's come hand in hand with those supernatural experiences. I remembered the lab and everything they put me through, everything they did to me, everything they made me do. I remembered Papa. The betrayal, the hatred and the misplaced and inexplicable love I'll always have for him. I could hear Kali's voice teaching me to how to focus my powers, amplifying their strength. All of this, coupled with this boundless pit of anger I've found within myself, there was more power coursing through my veins than I've ever felt before.

Suddenly three things happened, not quite simultaneously, but mere milliseconds apart.

Firstly, just as Matt was about to reach my lips, he stopped kissing me, let me go and took a step back. The realisation of what he was doing dawned on his face as he whispered, "I can't do this. Oh my God, Jane, I'm so sorry, I don't know what I was thinking, this isn't

like me at all and I just had to prove-"

Secondly, Matt's weird, sudden apology was cut short by his large bookcase falling on his head, which came crashing down as soon as my hand was free and I could gesture for the bookshelf's collapse.

Thirdly, Matt's bedroom door was flung open from the outside, revealing a screaming Will Byers brandishing a baseball bat.

9. Chapter 9

Will's POV

Just as suddenly as those three events occurred, the room went silent. El stopped screaming once she managed to move the bookshelf, Matt stopped screaming when the bookshelf fell on him, and I stopped screaming when everyone else stopped screaming.

Connecting the dots and figuring out what had just happened, I felt a huge wave of relief rush over me. I had made it just in time, and it turned out Eleven didn't even need me. I should never have allowed her to be put in this situation, but Mike and I should have never doubted her. I dropped the bat and ran to Eleven, strangling her in a huge bear hug. Using her powers must have really taken it out of her as she collapsed into the hug, squeezing me back just as hard.

"Are you ok Eleven? I knew Matt couldn't be trusted! I'm so stupid, I should never have let him... Wait are you ok because-"

"What are you doing here?" she asked me, still in shock after everything that had just happened.

"I was talking to Mike and-"

"Mike?! Why were you-"

"He made me realise that I haven't been looking out for you like I should have and I felt so awful and the more I thought about it, the more I realised that Matt was probably going to try something when you two were here in his house alone, so I looked for Jonathan to drive me here and help me but he was at work so I had to ride my bike but then I figured I wouldn't be able to stop him by myself if he was doing something really bad so I grabbed an old baseball bat that was in Matt's front yard because it's my job to protect you and I'm so sorry that I haven't been doing a great job of that but I just really hope you're ok so please just say you're ok, are you ok? Because I need to know if I can-"

Eleven cut off my rambling with a nod, I guess she was trying to tell

me she was ok. It wasn't entirely convincing but I didn't have time to hang around and ask her twenty questions on how she was feeling, we had to get out of this house.

We were crossing the bedroom together to get to the door when we heard noises coming from underneath the collapsed bookcase. The impact of the fall had caused the wood to break and fall apart, and suddenly those broken planks of wood started moving.

Eleven and I looked at each other, eyes wide with horror. A huge bookcase just fell square on Matt's head, how could he get up that fast? As much as I wanted to run out of here as fast as I could before he made his way out of the ruins and murdered me, I wasn't sure if, morally, I could do that, and I could tell Eleven felt the same way. He may have been seriously hurt by the bookcase and he could have broken bones or brain damage or worse. We couldn't just leave him there. We just stood there looking at each other, silently deciding what to do.

Suddenly an arm popped out of the wreckage, giving Eleven and I the fright of our lives. It looked exactly like a movie, a zombie hand rising out of it's grave, reaching his clawed hand into the fresh air. We grabbed each other's hands and squeezed. It was nice remembering that I wasn't alone, that whatever happened here, I'd have Eleven. The free arm started wriggling and shifting some wood fragments, books and debris until the other arm came into view, and then the head, and then he was standing up. His eyes found us immediately and they were wide with shock. We all stayed completely silent. I realised that I might have been right about my brain damage theory. Or else he was just taking a second to get ready to pounce on Eleven and I.

He took a huge, exaggerated breath and closed his eyes, looking like he was calming himself down. In retrospect, I actually think it was the opposite, because all of a sudden he started yelling, "WHAT THE HELL WAS THAT?"

Eleven and I stood frozen in shock. We hadn't expected the yelling.

"WELL?"

Eleven took a breath and carefully replied, "What?"

"DON'T PLAY DUMB, THE TWO OF YOU KNOW WHAT IM TALKING ABOUT!"

"We honestly have no idea what you're trying to tell us!" I jumped in, and to be fair, we genuinely didn't.

"I SAW YOU MAKE THE BOOKSHELF FALL ON ME WITHOUT TOUCHING IT! YOU JUST STUCK OUT YOUR ARM AND MADE IT FALL! WHAT THE HELL KIND OF FREAKY NERD SHIT IS GOING ON HERE?!"

Oh no.

Eleven and I looked at each other with huge, worried eyes. I thought that the worst case scenario here was that Eleven may have accidentally killed the quarterback. It didn't occur to either of us that Matt may have seen Eleven use her powers.

Matt started climbing out of the wreckage and walked right up to and Eleven and I. He looked at us expectantly. He was standing so close that I could look right into his green eyes. They were small and vivid and interesting. And tired. I couldn't imagine why though, he's basically the king of high school. What could possibly make him this tired? I could also see something strange lurking beneath the surface. Something angry and frustrated. I know what that feels like. That weird, intangible anger and frustration makes me feel like I was looking into a mirror. It's the thing inside me that made me destroy Castle Byers and made me resent my friends and their new relationships. It's a feeling that suffocates and strangles you, the way that only a secret can. So even though Matt Anderson and I could not possibly be more different, I think we have more in common that it seems. With his eyes so close to mine, I feel weirdly connected and it finally made me think that maybe love isn't necessarily out of the question for me and I wonder-

He abruptly snapped me out of my thoughts. "Are you guys actually not going to tell me what just happened?" he asked sceptically. He had calmed down but he seemed hurt or something. He knew what he had just seen and we were definitely acting weird. I appreciated

the reality check more than I could ever express. Just because Matt's eyes gave me a fluttery feeling in the pit of my stomach, it doesn't erase what he was just doing to Eleven. I may just have to keep reminding myself of that. "I saw the way you guys just looked at each other. I know I'm right! I know what I saw! I'm not crazy!"

We just stayed silent.

"And who the hell are you anyway?" he looked at me. "How did you get in my house? Wait," he paused, looking confused. "Are you the A.V. club boyfriend?"

I looked back and forth between Matt and Eleven nervously and started rambling in my own signature way that could only get everyone in trouble. "No! I mean, I'm in A.V. club but I'm not the uh, the boyfriend. I'm new at school too, I'm uhh, I guess I'm uh, Eleven's adopted brother? I don't know what we really are to each other, we haven't really talked terminology yet but I think we're kinda family now but I'm not..." My voice began to fade as soon as I saw the horrified look on Eleven's face and the confused look on Matt's as he opened his mouth to speak.

"Who the hell is Eleven?"

Eleven basically facepalmed beside me. All I can say is that I knew my rambling would get us in trouble, so really it's Eleven's fault for letting me speak in the first place.

"Did I say Eleven?," I attempted to cover my slip of the tongue. "I meant to say El! It's just that she uh..." I started grasping at any random straws that I could reach. I noticed a basketball ball of Matt's bedside table and just rolled with it. "You see," I explained, suddenly more confident after mentally crafting an excellent lie, "El was on the girl's basketball team back in Hawkins and she was uh, you know, number 11 and since her name sounded like Eleven, you know, El and all, that we just started calling her Eleven!" I let out a huge sigh of relief. My quick thinking had saved the day. What I didn't see was Eleven frantically shaking her head at me.

"Ok wait, who's El?"

"Um, sorry what?" Now I was confused. Wasn't Matt just trying to kiss El?

"It's Jane!" Eleven snapped at me.

So much for my excellent lie, my quick thinking. Eleven goes by Jane at school. All I'd just done was stick my foot in it even more.

"Ok wait, so is your name Jane or El or Eleven or... oh my God! Wait a second!" I didn't like the crazy look in Matt's eye. It looked like he was connecting some dots that I would really prefer he left unconnected. He grabbed Eleven's left arm. She tried to yank it back and I yelled for him to stop but it was too late, he had seen it.

"Woah..." he stared at her wrist, stunned. "Holy shit..." He moved the blue elastic band on Eleven's wrist slightly, revealing the tattooed number 011. He dropped her arm like it was on fire and took a step back. "I thought I something underneath the rubber band when I tried holding your hand earlier but I wasn't sure... You have a tattoo of the number 11 on your wrist... But you're a freshman? You're not old enough for a tattoo! How were you able to... That's can't be... that's not normal... The whole Eleven nickname story is total bullshit, this looks legit and official, it's not from some basketball nickname." He started frantically running his hands through his gelled hair, pacing slightly. "This is crazy! This is crazy! This is totally..." He suddenly stopped and turn to face Eleven and I once more, "Jane, Eleven, El, whoever you are, I saw what you did to that bookshelf and I saw that tattoo." He stood totally still and looked us both in the eye, and standing so close he was practically spitting in our faces he continued, "I know something is going on here. You have to tell me or else I'm going straight to my dad, who's a big shot reporter in the city so I promise you, if you tell me, then I'll keep your little secrets, but if my dad hears about this, it's going to be on the front page of every newspaper in the country. So the choice is yours." He looked from me to Eleven and spat, "So what's it going to be?"

I looked over at Eleven, totally unsure of what to do, but she just stared at her shoes with her eyebrows furrowed.

"If I tell you everything, you promise to never tell anyone?" She asked quietly and slowly, as if carefully thinking everything through.

"Eleven! What are you doing?!" I couldn't believe she was just going to tell Matt everything. Who knows what he would have done to her if she hadn't gotten back her powers or if I hadn't come here to stop him?! And besides, he's a total stranger! And he's older, and he's a football player, and he's popular. We can't just tell him everything that happened in Hawkins! And ignoring the fact that his face was still so close to ours that I could smell minty breath spray on his breath, and ignoring the fact that his complicated green eyes made my legs weak and my tummy feel funny, he couldn't be trusted. Under any circumstances. *Especially* because he made my legs weak and my tummy feel funny.

"What else can we do?" Eleven asked me, and as she looked up to reach my eyes, I could see the defeat on her face. We were out of options.

"I have... abilities," Eleven began slowly, clearly trying to figure out how to even begin to tell this story.

As Eleven continued, mentioning the lab and the tattoo, Matt's eyes kept growing wider and wider, but he stayed silent. He didn't want to miss a word of Eleven's story.

An hour had passed and we had only just reached the part in our story where I was taken into the Upside Down. As I caught sight of my watch, I knew we'd have to go home soon before my mother had a worry induced aneurysm. But Matt was so invested in the story that I doubted he would take kindly to it being cut short.

I had an idea.

"-Eleven?" I interrupted. "Mom will get worried if we're not home soon, so we better start going"

Eleven nodded while Matt started protesting. "You can't just leave now! I haven't even heard about how the-"

"-Why don't you come home with us?" I interrupted, taking a breath, wondering if this was really the best idea. For several reasons. "We need to get home and we'll have to tell my Mom that you know about everything now anyway, and she can help us tell you the rest of the

story." I looked over at Eleven to make sure she was ok with me inviting Matt home, and she just shrugged in response.

"Ok sure. Let's go!" Matt replied enthusiastically, grabbing a jacket from his wardrobe.

He began to lead us out of his house when I stopped us abruptly. "Why are you taking this so well? We're telling you some crazy things about government conspiracies and alternate dimensions without any proof, so why do you just believe us? You definitely have reason to think that we are losing minds..."

"I don't know," Matt replied, thinking deeply about his answer. "I guess I just believe you guys. You seem honest... And I know what I saw. You pushed that bookcase on top of me without touching it," he gestured to Eleven. "I guess I believe everything because if I saw that happen in my own bedroom, then who's to say that all that lab and Upside Down stuff didn't happen? And besides, I don't think you guys have any reason to lie."

"And you're ok coming with us to our house, the house of total strangers?" I asked.

"Well, the way I see it," he smiled his 100 Watt smile that seemed oddly more directed towards me than to Eleven, "is that she definitely could have killed me hundreds of times by now if she wanted." He pointed to Eleven with his head. "But seeing as she didn't already do that, I don't think I have anything to worry about. And besides, after everything you guys have just told me, we are not strangers anymore." he laughed. I couldn't bring myself to really laugh with him. Not after everything he almost did to Eleven. When he saw that neither Eleven or I found his humour particularly funny, he got more serious. "And I just want to say to both of you that I'm really sorry, I guess." he said with his hands in his pocket. "Especially you Jane- err I mean... Screw it, I'm just going to keep calling you Jane. I'm so sorry for everything that happened earlier, but everyone at school is obsessed with you, so I just wanted to be able to tell everyone that we had gone out and kissed, I guess, to seem cool and stuff. I promise you that I wouldn't have gone any further even if a bookcase didn't land on my head. It's not an excuse or anything, and I know how typical it sounds, but I just want you to know that what you saw today was not

me. Since this school year has started I've just gotten so wrapped up in the popularity contest at school, more than usual, and I got panicked and lost myself a little in the process. And it's actually really annoying because being lab partners with you has actually made me enjoy and, weirdly, understand biology for the first time like, ever. I hate that I've messed things up between us and I just really hope you can eventually forgive me, because I am genuinely really sorry and you have to believe me when I say that I would never go further than we did and I'm sorry we even got that far... And I promise I will never repeat a word of what you told me to anybody, ever. It stays in total confidence."

Eleven just gave him a short nod. She has such a poker face sometimes. I genuinely had no idea what she was thinking in that moment.

Matt let out a worried laugh. "Talkative as ever I see!" He tried to joke about it but it was nice to watch him squirm after seeing in vivid detail what Eleven would do to him if he tried something like that again. He turned to face me and continued talking. "And hey, I'm sorry to you too, for not actually realising you existed in school and stuff. It's Will, right?"

"Yeah." I still had no idea what to make of Matt. If he was a regular mouth breathing quarterback, he would never have backed off Eleven before the bookcase fell, and he would never heard us out when we started telling him what happened in Hawkins, he would have just called the cops. And he wouldn't be standing here now, apologising to both of us for everything. And he sounded so genuine. All I could do was hope those butterflies that had set up camp in my stomach flew away soon, because now is not the time to be solving the great mystery of my sexuality, or lack thereof.

He opened the front door, with us following close behind when I had to stop him one last time.

"How did you get lost?" I asked Matt. I did not mean to say that. My tongue went rogue. What was I trying to do to myself?

"What?" He looked confused.

"You just said to Eleven that with all the popularity, you got lost along the way." I clarified. "So, how did you get lost? What did you mean by that?" I was just digging myself into a deeper, weirder hole. I could officially announce to all that my vocal chords were now under new management and the rest of me wanted nothing to do with them.

Matt smiled while raising his left eyebrow so high that oxygen is scarce at that altitude. It couldn't have meant anything but trouble. "I think you know exactly what I meant by that." Noticing Eleven had looked away, Matt winked at me, and with that he opened the front door leading us into the brisk night air, hopping in his car and closely following Eleven and I on our bikes.

I started thinking about what my mom would say to us when we arrived home with a Junior who saw Eleven use her previously nonexistent powers and now knows parts of what happened in Hawkins over the last couple of years. It couldn't end well.

On the bright side, due to Matt's secretive wink, I think I can say with close to absolute certainty that the great mystery of my sexuality has been well and truly solved.

10. Chapter 10

A/n Hello to everyone still reading my story! It means a lot to see people are sticking with me while I write as fast as I can! Thanks for all the reviews and keep them coming!

I also want to let everyone know that I'm not ignoring Matt's actions towards El in order to force some kind of love story with Will, even though I realise that's how it might look. This is the first time people seem torn on a storyline of mine so I just want to say, we're not even halfway through the story yet! You guys have no idea what's coming, so don't worry, you can trust me! So even if you don't like what I'm doing with Matt, just bear with me and keep reading to see what happens!

Also this chapter was not planned, it just kinda happened. You're welcome?

Nancy's POV

I could smell the fart before I heard it. It was one of those whopper ones that smell like dead fish, at a strength that only 15 year old boys can achieve.

"Dustin, seriously?!"

"What are you looking at me for? That was Lucas!"

"No it wasn't! Dude that was so disgusting! It was definitely you!"

"No it wasn't! And please, even if it was, you've done ones so much worse you're just too cool to say that in front of your girlfriend!"

"Oh really? And how's Suzie Poo doing today?"

"Watch it, man, or I'm gonna-"

"-You're gonna what, exactly?"

"I'm gonna make you-"

"-Shut up!" I yelled and the car went silent. I couldn't take it anymore. I was losing my damn mind. Why did I ever agree to drive four teenagers for three hours to get to Chicago?

The brief silence was soon replaced by the sounds of Mike, Dustin and Lucas continuing to mess around in the backseat, when Max spoke up from the passenger seat beside me.

"Are you looking forward to seeing Jonathan?"

Oh yeah. That's why I agreed to drive four teenagers for three hours to get to Chicago.

I'm not even going to lie, the minute Mike asked me to drive him to Chicago, I was in. I could pretend to be a good person and say that it's because I too was extremely worried about El, or maybe even that I just really wanted to help my only brother and set his mind at ease.

But I'm just here for Jonathan.

Don't get me wrong, from everything I've heard from both Jonathan and Mike, it really doesn't sound like El's doing too great, and that's total *bullshit* because after everything she's done for us over the last few years, she deserves to be happy, and to catch a break. We need to help her, get her back on her feet and help her adjust to this new life of hers.

But Jonathan and I have never spent this much time apart since we started dating, and it feels really weird. We might fight and argue all the time over stupid stuff, but he's *my person*. I can feel it. Going to school without Jonathan is like going to school without an arm. We've never been a clingy, touchy feely couple, but being apart just doesn't feel right. We call each other almost every night to catch up and while obviously neither of us likes the whole long distance thing, we know we'll be fine. Neither of us are going to cheat or give up if things get too hard.

At least it's only for a year. Then Jonathan will be at NYU and I'll be at Columbia and everything will make sense again.

Not to mind, we'll be far away from Hawkins and all the inter

dimensional bullshit that we've had to deal with for the last few years.

We keep meaning to visit each other on weekends but things keep getting in the way, everything is still a bit hectic these days. Between studying for quizzes, working on my college applications and babysitting Holly, I never get to chance to drive up to Chicago. And Jonathan is dealing with the same things, plus the added bonus of worrying about how El's doing. I was in my room moping about having nothing to do on a Friday night when I heard Mike and his friends stampeding up the stairs. They burst into my room and they all started yelling instructions at me at the same time. After I got them to slow down and lower their voices, Mike explained how worried they were about El, and how I needed to drive them all to Chicago right that second. It was a crazy, random plan and even though I knew how terrible this 3 hour journey would be, at 11pm on a Friday night with four 15 year olds, I agreed to do it immediately. Because I'd get to see Jonathan.

"Yeah, I mean, it's been so long since I've seen Jonathan that it's just going to be nice actually talking in person, not through a crappy phone call. I wish I was seeing him under better circumstances though, because it really sucks that El seems so sad."

Being totally honest, I'm not sure how much I can actually help El. The most I can probably do for her is drive Mike and the others to Chicago. If Joyce can't get through to El, I don't think I have a chance. Maybe it's my own fault, but El and I have never really gotten to know each other properly. She's obviously always preferred to spend time with her own friends, which is fair, but Mike was right that time he was yelling in her old cabin. I've basically treated her like a machine, only spending time with her when the world needed saving. She needs to know that she's more than a weapon, she's a real person. We have to help her.

I also feel like I need to help her because Mike is just going to give up on life if something is seriously wrong with El. It's a little strange for them to be so serious about each other, but I weirdly don't doubt their feelings for each other. I had a couple of boyfriends at their age and even though we had said we loved each other at the time, I would have traded all of them for a pack of M&Ms at any given

moment. But Mike and El are different. Jonathan doesn't see it my way. He thinks they're too young to be in real love, after all, they're basically still kids. Maybe he's right, but I don't know... He hasn't seen it up close like I have. For starters, Mike was a different person that whole year she was gone. Before she disappeared, he had only known her less than a week, but she still had that big of an impact on him. He was moody and frustrated and aggressive for the whole year, always ready to start a fight. I thought it was just a puberty thing, but the second El returned, it was like I had gotten my baby brother back, and I didn't even really realise he had gone anywhere. And now, he spends all his time thinking about El or talking about El or talking to El. Jonathan and I don't call each other every night because long phone calls are expensive, and our lives aren't very exciting so we rarely have big news to share. Mike, however, calls El like three things a day on a radio at the highest points in Hawkins, which is like, almost an hour away from our house. He hikes up that huge hill three times a day just to talk to El. Why do two 15 year olds need to talk to each other that much? How could they possibly have that much news to share? All I know is that if a boy puts that much effort into talking to his girlfriend, then it must be the real deal. And I've seen El call for him when she's scared and in pain after her battles with monsters. She calls for him like he's the only person in the world that she can trust. If that's not love, then I have no idea what love is.

"Yeah. I really hope she's gonna be okay." said Max, chewing on her thumb and looking out the window. It's clear to see how worried Max is about El. Looking at her gave me a weird feeling of nervous déjà vu in my stomach. It was like I was looking into a mirror, or more accurately, a time machine. She reminded me of how worried I was about Barb when she first went missing. The same boundless worry, coupled with a frustrating anxiety and a deep rooted sense of guilt and fear that it was all her fault was reflected back at me.

I reached over to the passenger seat and squeezed Max's hand. She looked over at me with a small, worried smile. "It's all going to work out, I promise. It's going to be okay." I whispered, figuring the boys didn't need to hear this little conversation.

"How do you know?" she replied, slightly frustrated, under her breath.

"Because you're a good friend! And you guys are all going to help El and everything will work-"

"-How? How are we supposed to help her? Mike's acting like if we just show up at their house, El will magically start talking to us again and she'll be okay all of a sudden but that's not how things work! It's just not!... I'm trying to be a good friend, but what if it's not enough?" Max's voice had fallen to below a whisper, to a point where I could barely hear her anymore.

"Look, I don't know what's going to happen. I don't. But I do know that I've never seen a better group of friends in my life and if you guys can't help her, nobody can." I joked, but with a glance at Max's horrified face, I could tell that that was a genuine fear of hers. "I promise you, El is going to fine. Even if she doesn't realise it, she has so many people who care about her. You, me, the boys, Jonathan, Joyce. We all love her and none of us are going to let her give up on things, just because it's hard. We just need to show her that we're all here for her. That you're here for her. You two are best friends. You just need to remind her of that."

Max gave me a genuine smile while a small tear rolled down her cheek. As soon as she noticed it, she wiped it away quickly and glanced behind her to check that the boys didn't see the brief chink in her armour.

She really didn't have anything to worry about. The boys were still wrapped up in a stupid argument, yelling at each other in the backseat. They wouldn't even notice if I crashed the car.

"I know what it's like to be worried about your best friend," I continued, this time it was my voice that was almost silent. "So I know how you feel. But you just have to believe that's things are going to work out."

I had known that Max was a fiery tempered tomboy, so I shouldn't have been surprised to see her snap. "Yeah, and things worked out great for your best friend, didn't they?" she spat.

I felt like I had been slapped. I didn't think Max knew about Barb, but it made sense that the boys caught her up on the Upside Down

adventures that she missed out on.

I knew she didn't mean it though, I could tell by the horrified look on her face that formed immediately after her cutting remark.

"I'm so so sorry Nancy, I didn't mean-"

"-it's ok! Honestly, I know you didn't mean it that way. It's really ok-"

"-you have no idea! I had no right to say that-"

"-Max! Please, it's ok, I know what you were trying to say and-"

"-Seriously Nancy." Max reached over and squeezed my hand. I looked over at her. "I'm so sorry. I didn't mean it like that and it doesn't matter anyway because I shouldn't have said it."

I just smiled to let her know she was forgiven. "The thing is though," I murmured, "you're not exactly wrong. I just brought up Barb so I could let you know that I understood how you're feeling. But the difference between our situations, is that Barb was trapped in the Upside Down, El is right here. You can actually help her. Things are all going to work out because we won't let anything go wrong."

Max let out a small breath of relief. She was finally starting to realise that El was going to be ok.

"You can't blame yourself for what's happening to El, you know. You have to stop feeling guilty about it." I continued. "After all, I know better than anyone how suffocating guilt can be." I said, more to myself than to Max.

"Well, then you have to stop blaming yourself too." Max replied. When she saw the slight confusion on my face, she clarified, "for Barb."

"That's different." I murmured.

"It's not!" Max insisted.

"Don't you see? What happened to Barb is completely my fault! There's nobody else to blame!" I paused for a second, realising that it

had been a while since I got emotional about Barb. I'm used to blaming myself for what happened to her in my head, but it's been a while since I admitted it out loud.

"Umm, how about the Demogorgan? How about we blame that thing for what happened to her?"

"You don't know the full story, Max. You don't know everything that happened. You don't know-"

"-I know enough! Look, the details don't matter. All that matters now is that it's in the past. There's nothing you can do to change what happened, so you just have to find a way to move on from it. But just remember, you didn't drag Barb into the Upside Down. You didn't kill her. So therefore, it's not your fault." She explained, with an air of finality.

I replied with a weak smile, but for the first time, I felt that maybe what happened wasn't totally my fault. Maybe Max had a point. I knew that I'd feel guilty about it for the rest of my life, but maybe Max had a point. It didn't matter that Jonathan had been trying to tell me the exact same thing for the last year, and Steve tried the whole year before. It only started to sink in now.

Max smiled at me. She was really a lot wiser than she should be at that age.

I realised with a start that Max, Mike, El, all of the kids were only one year younger than I was when the whole Upside Down drama started.

That thought was terrifying. In my head, the kids were all still kids. But they were real life teenagers now.

It didn't matter how old they were though. Nobody, at any age, should have to go through everything those kids have gone through.

What I've been through.

And most of all, what El has been through.

We really need to save her.

"Max, you know what?"

"What?" She looked over at me hopefully.

"El's so lucky to have you as a best friend."

I wasn't able to save my best friend, but I'm going to make damn sure that Max saves hers.

11. Chapter 11

A/n I literally don't have an excuse even remotely good enough to explain why I've been MIA for so long, except that I can only write when I'm in the mood, and I guess I'm only now becoming reinspired. Sorry. I told you I don't have a good excuse. I'm gonna try to keep updating, because I have this whole story planned out and we're not even halfway yet. Another reason why this chapter took me so long is because for whatever reason, I found it really hard to get inside Max's head, which is really annoying because she's one of my favourite characters. I ended up giving her a bit of a backstory that I wasn't intending to, so here you are.

I hope you enjoy and please please please review!

Max's POV

"El's so lucky to have you as a best friend." Nancy smiled, and I got the feeling that she meant it.

Back in California, I didn't really have any best friends. I was friends with some boys who lived in my neighbourhood, but those friendships were nothing like the bond between the party members. Lucas, Mike, Dustin and Will, and even El and I too, are bonded together by this crazy, ridiculous thing that we've all lived through. There's nobody else in the world who can understand what happened to us. Even we can barely understand what's happened to us. This trippy experience ties us together for life. But I get the feeling that even without all the monsters from another dimension, we'd still have the same bond. Especially the boys. Whenever the six of us are together, it feels like we can do anything. We're invincible. We belong to each other. I haven't felt anything like that before. Certainly not with my friends in California. They were friends due to geographical convenience and a passion for skateboarding, but it didn't get much deeper than that.

It wasn't surprising that when I came to Hawkins, I gravitated, as usual, towards a group of awkward boys instead of preppy girls with perfect perms. The only females I had ever known were bitchy, like

the girls at school, who only cared about boys and clothes, or they were weak and spineless, like my mom, who forget that they're allowed to have valid opinions and feelings. Boys are easier. Their brains aren't developed enough to figure out how to be two faced and gossipy. With boys, what you see is what you get, but girls have always been a mystery to me. They never say what they're thinking, and they never mean what they say.

But El isn't like that. She has no idea how to filter herself, and lying goes against literally all of her principles. She basically made me rethink everything I had ever known about girls. I never thought girls could be badass and powerful and simultaneously be incredibly girly. But then again, at the time, I didn't know El. Her favourite colour is pink, she loves getting all dressed and would spend hours trying on clothes if she could, and she is the most boyfriend obsessed person I've ever met. By all accounts, I should hate her. I've hated many girls just like her. But then you realise she's basically the most powerful person on the planet, she's killed like, hundreds of people, using just her mind and oh yeah, she's literally afraid of nothing. I didn't realise girls could be both of those things. Then I started to think El was some anomaly, but after getting know Nancy and Mrs. Byers, I've realised I've just surrounded myself with the wrong kind of girls. Maybe not every member of the female species is as pathetic as my mother or as bitchy Stacey. Maybe I can still be as intimidating and cool as I want, while also having a boyfriend.

I think El is under the impression that I've taken her under my wing, like I'm teaching her the ways of the world. She has no idea how much I've learnt from her. I finally have someone who gets me, and accepts me for who I am. El and the rest of the party, they mean more to me than my pathetic excuse for a family.

Don't get me wrong, I've never had some pillar of familial perfection to look up to, but after what happened to Billy this summer, it kinda feels like everything's just imploded. Back in California, I liked to pretend things were perfect at home, but if I'm telling the truth, they just weren't. They never have been. I love my dad more than anybody in the world, but he's messy and unpredictable, always hiding behind a facade of bravado. And I loved him for it. I always looked at him and thought, that is how I want to be when I grow up, wild and free,

with no shits left to give. I'm only now starting to realise that maybe that's not the best way to spend your life. I don't remember my parents ever being in love, but what I do remember is my mom always getting secretly frustrated at my dad for drinking too much or disappearing for a few days. She'd always keep whatever she was feeling to herself though. She was never any good at sticking up for herself. But it didn't matter. My dad could always tell when my mom was angry and could charm the frustration away. My dad was good at that. Making you forget all the reasons to be angry at him, leaving you only with the feelings of love and awe.

When my mom met Neil, he brainwashed her into thinking dad's some villain that she needed to be rescued from. I was so angry at Neil for so long for destroying my small little family that only now, after having to grow up so fast over the last few months, I can see that maybe he wasn't entirely wrong. Maybe my dad isn't the hero, but that doesn't mean he's the villain. I'm starting to realise that my dad's just a person. Just a person that made my mom really unhappy for a really long time.

Little did I know that living with the Hargroves was so much worse than living with my dad had ever been. At least my dad didn't get angry. Or scary. Or violent. As much as I hate how spineless my mother is, I can at least understand the need to keep her true feelings to herself in our new happy family. I'm not sure Neil would take kindly to my mother telling him to stop being a dick. And at least when we lived with dad there wasn't a demon stepbrother actively trying to make my life terrible. Billy was always a temperamental person, but back in California we actually sometimes occasionally got along. We bonded over how much we didn't want our parents to get married. I think he had his own issues with his mother because neither him or Neil ever mentioned her. Neil has no problem swearing about my father, but his first wife seems to be an off limits topic. I honestly don't know what happened to her, whether she left or Neil left her or what. But I do know that something deep down inside Billy is rotten and twisted, and I think it came from his parents.

Billy got expelled from so many schools in California so that when Neil got the offer to move to Hawkins for his job, he and my mom

thought it was a huge blessing. They said they could now finally move away from my dad, as if he was the problem. I think what they meant to say is that they could finally find a school that would let even Billy attend. Leading up to the big move, Billy just got angrier and scarier and more broken, I think. And because of that, he wanted to break other things. But after the syringe incident at the Byers' last winter, Billy started to leave me alone. He didn't like feeling powerless and that's exactly how I made him feel that night. He couldn't bother me again, for fear of risking what was left of his dignity after he was essentially defeated by his much younger stepsister. Because of his desire to stay as far away from me as possible, I didn't even realise what he was going through, battling the mind flayer by himself.

Billy was Billy. A scary and hateful boy, with something rotten and twisted resting just below the surface. And logically, I understand that Billy deserved his gruesome fate more than any of the rest of us. And logically, I know it's better that it was him and not El or Will or anyone else. And logically, if it was just Billy that died and not also Hopper, we would have considered the whole mission a job well done. And yet...

Billy was family. In whatever weird, twisted way, he was family. And he did the right thing in the end. And even though he appears to be the villain of the story, I can't just forget about all the times in California that he bought me ice cream or showed me how to fix my skateboard or how he taught me how to sneak into the movie theatre without getting caught. And I hate that I can't forget it. I want to be able to move on like the others and just say, well, he did deserve it. But I can't. I feel him everywhere, just waiting to pounce. And, for whatever reason, I feel so guilty about him dying. This whole upside down mess was my burden to carry, not his. I don't know how he got involved in all of this, or why, but maybe none of this would have happened if I hadn't forced my way into the party all those months ago.

The worse part is, I can't even talk about this kind of stuff with the others. They wouldn't get it. They don't understand why I feel bad that Billy's gone. He was a terrible person to them. Specifically to Lucas, my own boyfriend. I couldn't expect Lucas to be there for me

as I grieved the death of the person who could have killed him last November. But El... El was the only person who just... got it. Without words, she just understood. When everything first happened this summer, we would just hold hands and cry. It was so nice to have someone who was just there for me, just like I was there for her. The moment I found out she would be moving to Chicago with the Byers, I remember feeling like my heart was literally breaking. Lucas was great, but El was my person. I needed her, especially after what happened this summer. I had never had a best friend before and I had no idea how I could go back to not having one.

The day the Byers moved to Chicago, El and Mike were all weepy and romantic, but when El came to say goodbye to me, there was no tears from either of us. I realised that there didn't need to be. The distance didn't matter, we didn't need to promise to call each other every single day and we didn't have to say a proper goodbye. Because we're best friends. It's not some soppy romantic relationship which needs more TLC to thrive. We were each other's best friends and nothing would ever change that. It wasn't the end of our story, we'd see each other every few months. So why did we need to cry?

But then as El started to settle into her new home, she started calling me less and less, and when I called her, she would barely talk. I was worried about her, but I never really thought that she could be going through something terrible. I was too blinded by my own struggles and suffocating guilt to realise how bad things had gotten with her. I thought she was fine. I thought that maybe I was too boring to talk to, or she didn't want to bother making the effort to call, or maybe that she had replaced me with a new friend already.

I can't believe I'd been so oblivious! How could I not see that she was struggling? How could I miss that? What kind of pathetic excuse for a best friend am I?

I don't know, maybe Nancy's right. Maybe now I just have to move on and focus on helping her.

But I'm just so worried about her.

We need to save her.

Now.

"Hey Nancy, did you-"

As I began to ask Nancy a question, I was cut off by the car coming to an abrupt, violent, jerking stop.

The car went silent, even the boys in the back seat shut up.

"What the hell just happened? That's so weird." Nancy wondered, trying to restart the car without any success.

"Do you have gas?" asked Dustin.

"Of course I have gas!" She snapped in response.

"Is it the car battery?" Mike suggested.

"No I don't think- shit!" She exclaimed. She hopped out of the car and ran around to the right, back wheel. "Shit!"

The boys and I all popped open our seatbelts to take a look and whatever Nancy was yelling about. In the back of the car, one of the tyres had been essentially sliced open, maybe by some glass on the road.

"Don't you have a spare in the trunk?" asked Lucas.

"Shit! No!" Nancy raised her hands to her head. "I kept meaning to replace it but I never got around to it!"

"Nancy!" Mike yelled.

"I just forgot, okay!" She yelled right back. "Oh God, we are stranded halfway between Hawkins and Chicago in the middle of a Friday night. What are we supposed to do now?" She asked in shock.

Everyone was silent.

"Wait a second, I saw a payphone at the side of the road half a mile back. Maybe we could walk there and call someone?" Lucas suggested.

I couldn't help but feel a warm feeling of pride at this discovery. The only person to think of the phone we passed, was my boyfriend. Sometimes he is so oblivious and stupid that I wonder why I put up with him, but it's times like these that I remember he's just as smart as Mike and Dustin. Maybe even smarter sometimes.

But the discovery of the phone led to another question. Who to call? None of our parents were going to be too pleased with driving an hour and a half to meet us. And when I say, none of our parents, I really mean none of their parents, as calling my parents isn't even on the table. As far as they know, I'm spending the weekend at the house of an imaginary girl named Louise. My mother would faint and probably haemorrhage if she knew I was driving to another state at 11.30pm with 3 boys and a teenager to stay in the house of a troubled telekinetic girl and her adopted family. And if Neil knew, he'd drive out here to meet us with a baseball bat and his impeccable aim. So it's safer to stay at Louise's house and call someone else's parents.

If we had been able to drive straight to the Byers in Chicago, we could have reached it before it got unreasonably late, but if we got someone from Hawkins to drive out to meet us with a fresh tyre, it could be morning before we entered Chicago. But we had no alternative.

"So who are we gonna call?" Nancy asked, and I could feel the boys taking everything they had not to shout "GHOSTBUSTERS!" right back at her, as she was clearly not in the mood for any of their shit. "I could call my mom or dad, but they wouldn't be too happy. My mom make me drive you guys straight back home, and then we'll never get to the Chicago." Mike nodded in agreement.

"My mom is probably unconscious, so I doubt she can drive up here with a spare tyre." Dustin added.

"Yeah, my parents will probably flip!" said Lucas.

"Ok, so we can't call anyone." Nancy voiced her thoughts aloud, clearly vocalising her attempts at forming a plan. "Any more bright ideas?"

Judging by the silence that question caused, I doubted there were even any dull ideas, forget about bright.

"Great." sighed Nancy, rolling her eyes.

Dustin gasped. "Wait! I got it!" he cried.

Everyone immediately guessed what he was about to suggest and rolled their eyes as a frustrated response.

"We're not calling Steve Harrington, Dustin" Lucas deadpanned.

"Why not? Does anyone else have any ideas?" Dustin paused. "No? I didn't think so. Look, Steve can get here in like an hour with a spare tyre I'm sure, and then he can drive back to Hawkins. And we can drive on to Chicago, and nobody gets grounded. Problem solved!"

"Dustin, I'm not calling my ex boyfriend in the middle of the night to drive for an hour to bring me a tyre so I can go on to drive to visit the house of my current boyfriend." Nancy groaned.

"Ok fine then!" Dustin cried with indignation. "Here I am, the only one coming up with any ideas and you just shut me down! Ok let's hear what-"

"-Dustin, shut up" Mike interrupted. "Look Nancy, this isn't about you or Steve or Jonathan. It's about El. She needs us. And if Steve is our best hope, then we're calling Steve."

Mike basically spends his life actively trying to raise my blood pressure, so I've never really understood what El sees in him. But it's moments like this, when he assumes his role of group leader, that I kinda get it. When he makes his mind up on something, there something in his voice that forces you to listen. He's the only person I've ever met that might occasionally be as powerful as El. And he's the only person who loves her even more than I do. So for the most part, I've learned to tolerate him.

Nancy looked sufficiently chastised after Mike's outburst. "Yeah ok Mike, you're right. Let's go call Steve I guess."

"Awesome!" Dustin celebrated. "I'll walk back to the pay phone and

call him!" And with that, he started walking.

"I better go with him." Lucas added. "I'm the one who saw it, so I'll show him where it is. And besides, if Dustin goes alone who knows how long he'll stay on the phone talking to Steve for." He went to follow Dustin.

Nancy started to look worried. "Max, do you maybe want to-"

"Don't worry, I'm on it" I started to jog to catch up with the boys. Nancy didn't even have to finish her sentence. Sending Dustin and Lucas by themselves seemed risky. When the boys are alone they tend to get distracted. Someone had to make sure they stayed on track.

12. Chapter 12

Lucas POV

I waited for Max to catch up before following Dustin. When I reached out to hold her hand, she quickly brushed it away. I get it, now's not the time.

Max cleared her throat. "How far back did you say the phone was?"

"It should take about 10 minutes to walk probably."

"Oh, cool."

Awkward silence.

Sometimes it's like that with Max and I. I never really know where I stand with her. One minute she's spilling her guts to me, the next she's fighting with me and the next she's, well, she's like this. Quiet and vacant.

I never know how hard to push when she's like this. I've been dumped many times for saying the wrong thing when she's in one of her moods.

So we just walked.

"Hey, are you ok?" I asked cautiously, bracing myself for Max's temper.

She looked over at me and raised her eyebrows. "What do you think?"

"You can actually talk to me about this stuff you know."

She just looked at her feet as we kept walking, refusing to meet my eyes.

"I mean," I continued, "you never told me that you and El stopped calling each other. I thought you guys were as close as always."

Max just shrugged in response.

"Is that it? That's all I get?"

"What more do you want, Lucas?" she asked. I thought I knew every tone of Max's voice, from royally pissed off to genuinely happy, but I had never heard her like this before. Totally defeated.

"I just want you to know that you could have talked to me about it."

We walked in silence for a few minutes.

"I can't talk to you about everything though." Max suddenly spoke.

"What are you talking about? Of course you can!"

"No, like, I really can't talk to you about some stuff. And I'm so worried about El and it's basically my fault that I let things get as bad as they did and so I feel really guilty but I always feel really guilty because I also just want her to be ok for completely selfish reasons so I can talk to her about the stuff I can't tell you." Max said, all in one breath.

"Wait what?" It took me a minute to decipher everything she had just said. "You know what happened with El isn't your fault, right?"

"Yeah, but-"

"-No buts! It's not your fault-"

"- Of course it's my fault! I'm her best friend! Shouldn't I have done something to help her weeks ago!"

"Max!" I took a breath. "It's not your fault because it's all of our faults. We all knew El wasn't doing well, but none of us did anything. This isn't your burden to carry alone."

Max just nodded, but I think she was finally understanding what I was trying to tell her.

We could see the pay phone up ahead as Dustin, walking ahead of us, ran into it. From the looks of the animated phone call taking place from inside the booth, Steve must have picked up.

"And seriously, what can you tell El that you can't tell me?"

Max just gave me a look.

"Is it like... period stuff?" I tried to keep a straight face, without squirming, as I said it but, judging by the look on Max's face, I wasn't completely successful.

I would describe the look on Max's face as completely enraged, just in case you were wondering.

"Is that what you think all girls talk about when we're alone? Periods and tampons and hormones? Lucas that is so stereotypical and-"

"-Hey! I'm sorry ok! I was just trying to think of something that maybe you felt like you couldn't talk to me about!"

"You want to know what I don't want to talk to you about?" she continued rampaging. "Fine! It's Billy! I can't talk to you about Billy!"

Another silence.

I was not not expecting that.

Or more accurately, I think some part of me knew that that's what she was talking about, but I never expected her to admit it out loud.

But the more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Max was distraught in the days following the 4th of July. She tried to pretend like she wasn't, but she was. Maybe she felt like her feelings of grief after watching Billy die weren't valid, just because Billy was an asshole. But he was her family. Of course she was grieving. As the months went on, it seemed like she had gotten over it but I could tell she hadn't. But I know what happens if Max feels like I'm pushing too hard so I just avoided it, figuring she would come to me when she was ready to talk about it. But she never did.

I guess she's ready now.

"It's ok to feel upset after what happened to Billy, you know." I tried to explain. "He was your brother, it would actually be more weird if you weren't sad about it."

She just shook her head and looked at the ground. "It's not right, though." She said softly. "He wasn't a good person, he wasn't even my real brother and he was terrible to you. He hurt you! I shouldn't feel sad that he's gone."

I turned to face her, rested my hands on her cheeks and tilted her head up to face me. Reluctantly, her eyes met mine. "He meant something to you. It doesn't matter what, it just matters that he did matter. And he didn't deserve what happened to him. And he saved El and the rest of us. He wasn't the best person, but he was a person. And you're allowed feel whatever you need to feel."

Max just looked at me and I could start to see her eyes getting glassy. She pulled me in for a long, tight hug.

I had no intention of letting go.

I could finally feel her letting go of some kind of guilt and pain that she'd been holding onto so tightly for months now.

When she finally started to loosen her grip around me, I held her head and used my thumbs to wipe away some tears on her cheeks.

Max is amazing. She never fails to surprise me. Sometimes she can be hard work, but I wouldn't want it any other way.

She gazed into my eyes and rested her hands on mine, which were still on her cheeks.

"Lucas?"

"Yeah?"

"Sometimes think, maybe, you and I, I think I might be in-."

"-Me too."

She didn't need to finish her sentence. We were never as gooey and disgusting as Mike and El, but that doesn't mean we don't care about each other. We know how we feel about each other, and we have the rest of our lives to finish that sentence.

We leaned into kiss.

"Good news guys! Steve is on his way!" Dustin yelled, bursting out of the phone booth.

"Dustin are you kidding me?"

"Oh my god seriously!" Max and I yelled simultaneously.

Dustin looked at Max and I and I could see the realisation dawning on him. "Oh shit, was I interrupting something?"

...

"Ok so now, I guess we just wait." Nancy sighed leaning against the car, after we made our way back to her and Mike.

Mike did not look happy about Nancy's comment. "When did Steve say he'd get here?"

"When I called him he said he'd leave straight away with the new tyre. So I guess like an hour and a half? That's how long it took us to get here." Dustin answered, checking his calculator watch.

Mike groaned in frustration and ran his hands through his hair.

"Look man, just chill. There's nothing else we can do about it and besides, how much difference will a couple of hours make?" I tried to reason with him.

"Lucas!" Mike started yelled but immediately stopped himself. It's rare I see Mike letting go of his anger so easily. That's when it hit me how serious this whole mess is. "You just don't get it." he said softly and sat inside the car to take a breather.

Maybe I didn't get it. But I was starting to. El wasn't doing great. Everyone knew that. That's why we were coming to help her. But after seeing Mike and Max so worried tonight, things must be so much worse than I imagined.

We need to save her.

She's saved my ass so many times, even when I was actively hating her. To her, it didn't matter. And maybe I helped to save her a couple times. But that doesn't matter. What matters is that the party is here for each other no matter what and now that a party member is struggling, it is up to all of us to save her.

I really hope she's ok. After everything she's been through she really doesn't deserve this. I have no idea how I'm gonna help her, but I swear to god I'm gonna do it.

El, hold on tight, the cavalry is coming.

...

About two hours later, Steve had yet to materialise. It was 3AM and Dustin and Max were unconscious. Being honest, I had been too, up until a minute ago when I woke up with a start. I was having a nightmare about being stranded on a road in the middle of nowhere in the middle of the night.

Then I realised that it wasn't a nightmare.

It's my real life.

As I slowly rose I took account of my surroundings. Dustin was reclined in the driver's seat and Max mirrored him in the passenger's seat. I was curled up in a ball in the back. I stretched and started to get out of the car to uncramp my long legs when I noticed Nancy pacing by the car, exactly like she had been doing when I fell asleep. Over an hour ago.

Mike was sitting on the curb, picking at a piece of skin of his thumb. As I walked over to sit next to him I noticed that it was much more than a small piece of skin he picked off.

The cut was so deep I was surprised you couldn't see bone.

"Dude." I said.

He jolted back to Earth and looked at me. "Sorry... I was out of it I guess."

"Yeah I could tell."

We just stayed sitting on the curb, watching the cars drive past on the quiet road.

"Don't give me some pep talk ok Lucas? It's bad, I know it is. So I don't need some bullshit, we can do it! speech. Because I genuinely don't know if we can."

"I wasn't gonna give you a pep talk." I defended myself. "I wouldn't know what to say. So let's just watch the cars and wait for Steve. We'll just deal with one thing at a time."

Mike nodded in response.

After a while, he spoke up again. "How's Max?"

"Do you care?"

"I mean, not really. But she's probably the only person who feels almost as guilty as I do about what El's going through alone."

I looked at Max through the car window. Her red hair caught the glow of the yellow street lights, making it look on fire. She's so beautiful.

"She'll be ok I think." I didn't say anything else. I'm known to ramble a lot, but I didn't have anything else to add.

Mike just nodded again.

I continued, "I think maybe we'll all be ok. You know, after a while."

Mike paused for a minute before eventually nodding again.

I realise that compared to El or Will or even Max, I don't really deserve to feel damaged after everything. And I'm usually not. It's not an act or anything, I'm just good at moving on with my life I guess. That doesn't mean I'm ignoring what happened or trying to pretend we didn't all go through it. It just genuinely doesn't seem to affect me. But sometimes, when I'm sitting on the curb of a quiet road connecting Hawkins and Chicago in the middle of a Friday night and

I start contemplating everything, I realise that maybe it does affect me.

Maybe I'm a different person than I was in November 1983.

But that person didn't have an amazing girlfriend or a slightly less amazing telekinetic friend.

So maybe the change was for the better.

I opened my mouth to say something when a car, a few yards down the road, started honking the horn. I could feel Mike getting ready for it to be Steve as he jumped up from the curb. The noises just increased as the car got closer, waiting up Dustin and Max. As the car got within our field of vision, it was clear it wasn't Steve's car at all. Which was disappointing. It was actually a large, mucas green tow truck.

Dustin rubbed his eyes and started to wake up. He jumped up down shouting, "Look Steve's coming! Over there! That's Steve."

Nancy gave Dustin a look. I think she had gotten her hopes too. "Are you kidding me? That's not Steve's car!"

Dustin rolled his eyes. "Of course not but it is him, I'm telling you, just look!"

As the car got closer, I could finally see who was inside. Steve was there and he was waving to us all, clearly proud of himself for being our hero.

The interesting thing is that the horrendous green truck was driven by a girl, sitting beside Steve. I definitely recognised her from somewhere but I couldn't place her.

"Is that Robin?" Dustin exclaimed with excitement.

That's how I knew her. She worked in Scoops Ahoy with Steve and got trapped in the secret Russian basement of the mall with Dustin this summer. It's all coming back to me now.

"Why is she here?" Mike asked as he stood up. "And what's with the

truck?"

Robin pulled in next to Nancy's car at the side of the road and she and Steve got out. Dustin ran up to fist bump Steve and hi 5 Robin.

"What's going on here?" Nancy asked. "Do you have the spare tyre?"

"Yeah come on!" exclaimed Mike. "Let's get going already!"

"Well actually that's a funny story." Steve ran his fingers through his hair, looking like he was trying to give us some bad news.

Dustin started to look confused. "What are you talking about?"

"You have the tyre, don't you?" Mike persisted.

"Um, actually, no."

"Steve!" we all yelled.

"This is typical" Nancy rolled her eyes.

"Steve, I trusted you! You're making me look bad!" Dustin complained.

"I can't believe this." Mike said, mostly to himself. He kicked the side of the car door in frustration and then sank to the ground, totally defeated.

"Ahhhhh, don't fret my favourite nerds!" Steve exclaimed. "I have a solution, let me explain..."

"When you called me Dustin, I went to my car to check to make sure I had my spare, but I forgot to replace mine too. My parents didn't have any either and neither did Robin when I called to ask her and I didn't know anybody else to get a spare tyre from in the middle of the night, and that's when Robin suggested-"

"-That's when I told him my dad owns a tow truck." Robin cut in, much to Steve's irritation. "I told him I could come with you guys and tow your car to the Byers house and then Steve and I could drive back to Hawkins."

We all let the new plan sink in.

"Well I don't know about you guys but I thinking we're wasting time here. Let's just go!" I was ready to save El. Both for her own sake and also for Mike's and Max's sakes. They wouldn't be able to rest until they knew she was ok.

Everyone agreed with me so we got to work securing Nancy's car to Robin's horrifically green truck.

We then piled 7 fully grown people into a truck that was designed for 5. It was not pleasant. There were legs and arms everywhere, and we were stuck like this for 2 hours. At first, everyone was really loud whether it was due to arguments or civil conversations, but soon enough the noise died down. I couldn't actually tell you what happened at this point of the journey, because I was fast asleep. But I do know that I woke up at around 4AM as Steve drove through a suburb of Chicago, with my mouth filled with Dustin's hair.

The truck came to a stop outside a small, tattered house. Steve compared the address on a piece of paper on his hand and the house number on the front door.

"Ok guys, I think we're here." Steve said as he tried to gently shake everyone awake.

Mike woke with a start. "What's going on he- Wait, did you say we're here?"

I spotted Mrs. Byers' car in the driveway, hidden by a shrub. "Yeah this must be the place."

We piled out of the truck and on to the doorstep, ringing the doorbell. Steve and Robin came too, as they both needed to use the bathroom.

After waiting a few minutes at the door, it was clear nobody was coming to answer it. I looked at my watch and reminded everyone that it was only 4.30AM.

"They're all asleep and even if they heard the bell, what idiot would open the door to someone at this time in the morning? I mean, who

would actually-"

Dustin was cut off as the front door swung open.

Jonathan answered wearing pyjamas, rubbing his eyes. "Sorry this isn't a good time, can you-..." His eyes popped out of his skull when he finally looked up and saw it was us. "What are you guys doing here?"

He seemed really worried and quickly glanced behind him. From beyond his shoulder, Mrs. Byers was sitting at the kitchen table with El, Will and a muscly guy wearing a varsity jacket, looking close to our age, maybe a little older. Everyone was looking pretty stressed. At 4.30AM in the morning.

Mike's eyes widened. "What the hell is going on here?"